REBUILDING TRUST IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP BY IDENTIFYING AND OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL ABUSE BY FORMER PASTORS

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ABSTRACT

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ABUSE BY FORMER PASTORS

by
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This project was implemented in Wausau, Wisconsin. The problem is that pastors who follow a spiritually abusive predecessor often struggle to gain the trust of the congregation. If pastors participate in a case study about spiritual abuse, then they will be equipped with resources to help their parishioners begin recovering from previous abusive pastors. This project used a case study with qualitative narratives and directed theory research methodologies over eight weeks. The goal of this project was to equip clergy to rebuild a congregation's trust in clergy and God.

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My parents, Ed and Judy Borke deserve primary credit for raising my brothers and me in the church and modeling a life of faith, hope, and love. Their deep care and encouragement for me as a woman, mother, and pastor continue to strengthen me.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Ed and Judy Borke, whose lives and faith humbly reflect the character and compassion of Christ.

ABBREVIATIONS

UMC	United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Pastors and churches see too many empty pews and Sunday School rooms. Empty-nesters and young adults without children are more likely to be enjoying Sunday brunch than engaging in Sunday worship. Children, youth, and their parents are often dedicated to traveling for athletic competitions and recreational activities on weekends. Many congregations across the continent and beyond have been asking themselves, "What can we do to attract people to our church?" Some people are concerned about recovering those who were once involved and have either slowly or suddenly stopped participating. Others are focused on reaching out to friends, co-workers, and neighbors who would clearly benefit from growing in faith, hope, and love that comes with healthy church involvement.

There are many reasons why people are not making church involvement a priority in their lives. Clergy and congregations find it easy to blame individuals or society for the decline of church attendance. Whatever the motivations are to find answers to the question of how to rebuild trust and connection to the church, there are often invisible and unspoken issues that cannot be overcome with the latest programs, persuasive preaching, and attractional methods. Sadly, some of those potentially helpful techniques have been distorted and used by abusive church leaders as weapons that confuse and control those in their churches. It is ultimately counterproductive to hide or bury clergy and congregational complicity for declining public trust in churches and faith in God.

Though most pastors serve congregations with great integrity and skill, others have deeply harmed people and parishes. Because of the pastor's spiritual position of power, many affected congregants struggle to recognize the reality of spiritual harm. The term "spiritual abuse" is a novel concept for most people. However, spiritual abuse and religious trauma deeply affect not only those directly impacted but also rippled out to afflict the wider Church. The damage done to both individual souls and the collective Body of Christ needs to be recognized, remedied, and reversed.

Due in part to spiritual abuse, trust in clergy has deeply eroded over several decades. This is not unique to pastors and churches but has also affected other professions and institutions. However, it is incumbent on clergy and congregations to lead the way in recognizing the reasons for the precipitous levels of declining trust. As the Apostle Peter told the early church, "For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God"[1]. Trust must be earned and rebuilt.

This process is not easy, either practically or spiritually. Congregations are often reticent to discuss unflattering parts of their past openly, and pastors are hesitant or feel unqualified to deal with the repercussions of a predecessor's abuse. Sometimes, the scars of spiritual abuse feel like the source of shame, and those who have been hurt prefer to avoid thinking about let alone sharing their painful and often confusing experiences. This understandable reality serves as a reminder of the importance of living with consistent compassion and character. The process of rebuilding trust after a pastoral betrayal is difficult and slow, and many may question whether the effort is worth it.

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[1] 1 Peter 4:7, NRSV

Perhaps the importance of working to rebuild trust is not to be limited by our humanity but highlighted by the unique and sacred calling of the Church to be one, holy, catholic (universal), and apostolic. We are not able to do this work alone but are dependent on God to do a divine work in us and through us. As we take small steps in trusting God to reveal how to bring justice and peace to those who have been hurt by an abusive pastor, our own faith and trust levels may deepen. As our awareness and compassion grows, our congregations can grow.

This leads us back to the beginning, where we grapple with the pressing question of what will help our churches grow. The answers depend on how we respond to a few questions. Are we prioritizing the number of people in worship, the membership rolls, and the size of our budgets, buildings, and staff? Or are we looking for signs of growth based on the healthier levels of trust that people have in Christ, our congregations, and clergy? It is more difficult to measure the latter, but focusing only on the former is short-sighted.

The following chapters provide only a few examples of ways clergy and congregations can better understand and address the problems of spiritual negligence and abuse. Chapter One, the Ministry Focus, explores some professional and personal experiences with spiritual abuse. It is not intended to foster pity, but to build rapport with readers who have faced similar challenges in their churches and homes. Rebuilding trust requires both vulnerability and empathy, and this chapter seeks to build on that foundation.

The second chapter, Biblical Foundations, explores the text of Titus 1:5-9. It is one of a few Scriptural passages which describe the qualities necessary for pastoral

leadership, as well as signs that should disqualify a person from having spiritual authority. Said succinctly, the necessary traits are a blameless character and competence, motivated by Christ's compassion.

The Historical Foundation of John Wesley's Covenant Service and Prayer is the focus of Chapter Three. This section suggests that a key impetus in John Wesley developing this service was in recognition and response to his own pastoral failure and abusive traits while serving as a missionary to the fledgling Georgia colony. The service and prayer are characterized by humility, honest repentance, and renewing a covenant to fully trust and serve God rather than self. Clergy and congregations through the centuries have benefitted from personal and congregational renewal based on those qualities.

The fourth chapter is based on the Theological Foundaton of Forgiveness. For those who have been spiritually abused, both the concept and practice of forgiveness is fraught with underlying biblical and theological complexities. Many clergy and parishioners have an anemic understanding of forgiveness, which can lead either to "cheap grace" and ongoing abuse, or a resistance or avoidance of God, the Church, and the hope and healing found therein.

Chapter Five explores the Interdisciplinary Foundation of Impression Management. Developed as a field of Sociology (as well as within Social Psychology), Impression Management describes the methods used by individuals and institutions to present themselves to society in ways which increase their rewards and minimizes the consequences of their personalities, policies, and practices. To apply this to clergy and congregations, we learn to recognize ways that Impression Management can be helpful, harmful, or healing.

The sixth and concluding chapter, the Project Analysis, summarizes the results of an attempt to implement the information from the previous chapters. Though the project did not proceed as planned, it yielded helpful insights, positive impacts, and deeper questions and issues that deserve continued study. Much work is yet to be done.

The resources developed for this project could readily be prepared and adapted for "after-pastors" to use in their congregations. Some of the tools developed by the Foundations may be more applicable to different people and parishes. They could all be used to help describe and address the spiritual pain caused by harmful church leaders.

This research and project have revealed the need for a greater reliance on God to redeem and transform broken trust levels in the clergy and the Church. This study is an invitation to the Holy Spirit to graciously shine Christ's light in all the dark corners of the life of his Church. As we humbly open ourselves to God's convicting and healing presence, we can begin to rebuild trust in God and learn to better recognize trustworthy church leaders and healthy congregations. Let us pray and learn together how to lead with Christ-like character, competency, and compassion so Christ's Church can be a foretaste of heaven on earth.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Context

In 1960, First Methodist Church described itself as:

> Wausau's oldest church, it has served at the heart of the city since 1847. Presenting a warm and vital faith which exalts Jesus Christ as the Lord of all life, it welcomes all people into its fellowship, regardless of race or station. Offering an historically free pulpit with a prophetic message, its gospel relates Christ to all aspects of personal and social living. Concerned with the total needs of free men, it encourages a responsible exercise of that freedom by individuals according to the dictates of their own consciences.[1]

Many of those qualities and focuses are still true sixty-five years later, but much has also changed and challenged the congregation. During the peak years of attendance and participation in the 1950's – 1970's, a fifty-thousand-square-foot church building was constructed in two phases. Between the Sanctuary and Chapel, the building was designed to hold five hundred worshipers at once. In those "glory days", Sunday School rooms were filled with over a thousand students enrolled in two-hour Sunday morning classes.

First United Methodist is in the heart of downtown Wausau, Wisconsin. Wausau is the center and county seat of Marathon County, the largest county in the state geographically. Wausau has a population of forty thousand, with another forty thousand

[1] Dedication booklet of First Methodist Church, Wausau, Wisconsin, January 31, 1960, 9.

in adjacent suburbs. Wausau is the hub of central and northern Wisconsin, with a statistical metropolitan area of 166,000 people in about 2,400 square miles.[2]

The downtown church building is bordered by three streets and covers 1.75 acres with a beautiful courtyard on the south side and a parking lot for forty-nine vehicles on the north side. The YMCA shares eighteen of their nearby spaces with the church on weekends and evenings. Adjacent to the east side of the church property is the Marathon County Historical Society, across the street to the south is the YMCA, to the north is an older residential neighborhood, and across the primary downtown business street on the west side of the building is a new three-story Aspirus medical clinic. First UMC is strategically located two blocks north of City Hall, two blocks east of the Wisconsin River, and within a few blocks of the County Courthouse, the historic downtown shopping district, and the "400 Block" public events square.

The city attracts outdoor enthusiasts with Rib Mountain State Park, Granite Peak, the largest ski hill in the Midwest US with seventy-four runs and eight lifts, and a world-class kayaking course that runs through the downtown as the longest and most-used natural course in the world. The northern half of Wisconsin is sparsely populated, and Wausau is both the gateway and hub where people from farther "up north" travel from up to one-hundred and sixty miles away for specialized services, goods, and care. Many more people come from the south to go to or through Wausau to enjoy a wide range of events and vacation in the pristine forests, rivers, and lakes nearby. Worship attendance at First UMC has always dramatically decreased between May and September, as many people in the congregation spend weekends vacationing in the Northwoods.

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[2] "Wausau, WI Metro Area," Census Reporter, accessed Sept. 7, 2024, https://censusreporter.org/profiles/31000US48140-wausau-weston-wi-metro-area/.

First UMC has held a long-time commitment to equality and inclusion. The congregation voted in February of 1959 to accept a "Statement of Policy" which affirmed that "our church is an inclusive fellowship, with all peoples of all colors, races or nationalities being welcome in our fellowship." At the rear of the Sanctuary and Narthex is a twenty-four by thirty-five-foot-stained glass window depicting Christ compassionately teaching, inspiring, and uniting people of over a dozen ethnicities. This has been an inspiration and depiction of the church's focus on welcoming and integrating refugees into their community.

The congregation has also valued the pastoral leadership of women, starting in 1935 when they welcomed Rev. Minnie Cliff, a former school principal and missionary to China, as the first of now eight female pastors. First UMC was the first in the Wisconsin Conference to have two women serving at the same time as the Senior and Associate Pastors. While Reverends Bernadette Brunner and Cathy Hamblin were leading the church in 2003, First UMC was picketed by the Westboro Baptist Church, a hate group from Topeka, Kansas. The church was targeted because of the congregation's history of welcoming women in leadership and growing in understanding and supporting the dignity and equality of LGBTQ people. Pastor Hamblin recalls worshipers having to walk past demeaning signs held by hateful protesters to get inside the church building for worship. Pastor Brunner is credited with wisely preparing protective ushers to escort intimidated worshipers, as well as for organizing and leading a well-attended and meaningful healing service for the whole community after the hate group finally left town.

There are also less-flattering examples from the congregation's "glory days". A former pastor shared a story about his meeting with the Altar Guild. They were looking

through church supply catalogs and selecting new shiny plated chalices and pattens for serving communion. The senior pastor suggested that they also consider some beautiful ceramic options. Aghast with indignation, they refused to consider anything but silver communion ware with the protesting words, “We are a classy downtown church!” The pastor concluded the story by explaining that over the next decade he presided over the funerals of all those in the church who insisted on maintaining a “classy” image.

In more recent years, the congregation’s ways of identifying themselves have shifted. As their size and pride have decreased, the congregation has experienced increased humility and healing. Those glimmering communion sets are still used in worship, but the congregation now seems to recognize that we are all made of clay. Though the church is still active in mission, discipleship, and worship, the cavernous building has been greatly underutilized for several decades as decreasing membership and attendance follow national trends.

First Wausau UMC has yielded remarkable fruit in Christian formation, worship, ministry, and missions going on two centuries. Like many churches, when one searches retrospectively through more recent decades of history, several cracks and tarnished spots are inevitably discovered. In particular, there have been a few “rotten” pastors in the past fifty years. They were not only made of clay, but their lack of Christ-like character cracked and shattered the faith and morale of many in the church. Two of them, about two decades apart, allegedly sexually assaulted members of this congregation, including youth, yet were never charged or stopped. Another was very controlling, spiritually abusive, and lacked self-awareness of how they caused widespread alienation, distrust, and symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in staff and leaders. The congregation’s

trust in these pastors was betrayed, and it became more difficult for the congregation to trust other pastors. In addition, the congregation's trust in the Annual Conference was compromised because of the United Methodist appointment process. Pastoral appointments which became abusive and were never addressed added another thick layer of distrust.

First Wausau has been large enough to employ several staff members continuously, in addition to having two full-time pastors until recently. In the past three decades, at least two paid staff have betrayed the congregation's trust. In the 1990s, a financial staff member embezzled over $120,000. Trust was further compromised over the outcry of her extended and influential family. They were angry that the pastor reported the embezzlement to the police because the family had wanted to "save face" and quietly reimburse the church. The disgraced extended family and their loyal supporters were upset not to be given this option, while others in the congregation were upset over not only the betrayal of the embezzlement but the added insult to injury of an attempted cover-up.

About two decades ago, a loss of trust was likely caused by at least one staff member who is still unidentified but undeniably no longer in the church. A major incident occurred when the alarm system to the sanctuary was bypassed, the heavy lid to the organ was removed, thrown into the organ pipes, and caused over $100,000 of damage. The congregation was understandably shocked and felt like the Sanctuary had been desecrated. Back then, there was a common code for the alarm system that any staff member could have used. This incident changed the security system, so each staff member now has a unique alarm code.

The mystery of the betrayer's identity likely amplified the loss of trust. Around this same time, there were frequent disappearances of cash awaiting deposit in places only the staff would know about. Though it was rarely more than a few hundred dollars at once, it was still a deep betrayal and caused more loss of trust among both the staff and the wider congregation.

In addition to the loss of trust caused by several clergy and staff, trust was also compromised due to decades of denominational debate over the issues of human sexuality and gender identity. As a whole, the congregation has supported the full acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ people, both lay and clergy. When the same decisive denominational support failed in the past, trust was partially lost in the broader UMC. Even though this congregation is committed in word and deed to the full inclusion of all people, some members felt betrayed and left because of the denominational struggle to remove the offending barriers in the Book of Discipline.

As the first and, at many times, largest congregation in what was originally known as Big Bull Falls, First Wausau's history is rich. However, participation, membership, giving, and morale have been a steady decline over the past five decades. Part of the disengagement is culturally systemic, as trust in mainline denominations and other commonly identifiable "institutions" is widely questioned by the broader society. Another aspect is the ever-growing options of recreational and social opportunities for how people commit themselves, their time, and resources. Along the long road to recovering physically and socially from COVID, many formerly active church members remain hesitant to return to worship and serve in person. The problem this project aims to address, is the congregational decline of trust in this and many churches. Though accurate

statistics are difficult to ascertain, a significant reason for the church's decline can probably be attributed to people feeling betrayed and losing trust - or faith – because of pastoral abuse of power.

Through conversations with clergy colleagues in both the Wausau area and the state of Wisconsin, I have learned that there are many congregations in a variety of denominations that have had their trust betrayed by a former pastor. There are many examples of parishioners who have been coerced, shamed, manipulated, and left hurt and disoriented because of their pastor's words and actions. Sometimes, the abusive messages came from the pulpit. Persuasive sermons were preached, telling people to believe or trust only that pastor or church, and that other churches were apostate. Patriarchal interpretations of spiritual authority were emphasized over egalitarian servant leadership. Prayer was used as a passive-aggressive weapon of emotional manipulation. Stewardship became a disproportionate burden for the poor and vulnerable, who were falsely promised literal riches from God in return for their offerings. Women and children were counseled by their pastors to return to their abusers, extend unconditional and unilateral forgiveness, and submit in order to "please God" and regain favor with those who harmed them.

These are some of many broad examples of how pastors have betrayed the trust of their congregations. Though this study cannot attempt to adequately address the horrific problems of clergy who have sexually abused children and adults, it is an obvious and egregious example of spiritual abuse that must be thoroughly studied by those more qualified to safely and justly address and prevent this. In addition, there are many examples of cult-like religious teachings which have a propensity for abusive outcomes.

However, this context leads to a focus on exposing and addressing how congregations in a variety of contexts can recognize the more hidden signs of spiritual abuse, respond with resiliency, and rebuild trust in future clergy who exhibit the compassion, character, and competency that churches should expect in leaders.

Ministry Journey

There have been many themes in my ministry journey related to struggles in knowing who and how to trust as church leaders. My challenges began when I received a call to vocational ministry during my first year in college. I wrestled with the contrast of trusting the enthusiastic and charismatic student leaders in college, many of whom denied that women should be allowed to serve as pastors. Conversely, my youthful zeal made it difficult to trust the staid older clergy and the dying institutional churches they led.

Trust became more complicated as I began recognizing spiritual manipulation under the thin veil of an immature yet zealous faith of the student ministry leaders. At the same time, my trust was frustrated by what I assumed was the only alternative—a dry, formalized religion that seemed "safe" but felt incomplete at best and dead at worst. I was drawn to churches where faith was exuberantly taught, sung, and shared, but in the 1990's, I found it nearly impossible to find one that also believed both men and women could lead such a congregation.

The next crisis of trust began in my first marriage to a pastor. He seemed to miraculously fulfill every natural and supernatural desire I sought in a husband. I initially felt assured of what I thought was God's clear guidance to be life-long partners in marriage and ministry. Soon after our wedding, he became increasingly patriarchal and

emotionally, financially, and spiritually abusive throughout our seventeen years of marriage. As victims of abuse often experience, I doubted much about myself, my faith, and my discernment. His constant critiques that I was not praying enough or sacrificing enough for him were soul-sucking, especially given my exhaustion in trying to anticipate and fulfill every wish and whim he expressed.

I was relegated to the traditional role of the mother and pastor's wife while he served as an intermittent Licensed Local Pastor in several states for a combined total of seven years. During the other ten years of our marriage when he was unemployed, he refused to let me get a stable job with benefits to support the family because he felt it made him look bad and would limit his opportunities. He refused to be left alone with and care for our three young children, so I could only work while they were sleeping at night or during their naptime. In today's parlance, I was a *#tradwife* over two decades before it started trending. His chronic unemployment made the role he forced on me even worse. Often times, the only way we could buy food or pay utilities was for me to work odd jobs like teaching piano lessons and delivering newspapers. I even worked on call at night to surgically remove eyeballs and corneas from donors who had just died.

In addition, he used back pain as an excuse for why I had to do all the work for the household. Though he did have a back injury and surgery, doctors eventually determined that the pain was psychosomatic, and a useful excuse to burden others with work he could have and should have done. I was also expected to take complete responsibility for cleaning, maintaining, and improving our homes and yards so he could focus exclusively on the parts of pastoral ministry that he enjoyed while employed, or reading, visiting friends, and praying while he was unemployed.

I wrestled with how to perceive the frequent conflicts between him and people in the congregations that he served. Were they toxic and stiff-necked people who refused to trust his pastoral leadership, as he complained to me? Or was he, the man I trusted enough to marry, culpable in insisting on blind allegiance to him and his increasingly rigid and patriarchal interpretation of biblical theology? Because of the conflict he caused in the few churches he briefly pastored, I also did all the packing and managed many moves that he insisted our young family make in pursuit of helping him find or start the "perfect" church.

My husband had a rocky relationship with several Conferences of the United Methodist (UM) denomination, as well as other denominations that he joined during our marriage. I also developed a vicarious distrust of the UM appointment process and what I saw as undiscerning District Superintendents (D.S.) and Bishops. They seemed cold and detached, both in their personalities and religious leadership. For instance, at a two-point charge in West Virginia, one church had initially grown rapidly under his leadership while the other one disliked and resisted him. The D.S. told him, "If you cannot make both churches happy, I will move you. I had a five-point charge in my early career, and I was able to make everyone happy. You have to figure out how to do that too." That D.S. ended up reappointing my husband to a three-point charge on the day I gave birth to our middle child, less than a year into his appointment. My husband refused to accept the new appointment and was mostly unemployed for the next five years.

Though I now can interpret that D.S.'s blunt simplicity with a little more experience and grace, his mandate to simply "make everyone happy" still comes across as a tone-deaf and simplistic response to the needs and concerns of churches and clergy

alike. Overall, trust was tested as I looked at the options of a driven yet manipulative faith as seen in my husband/pastor and what I saw as conventional and spiritually dry leaders like that D.S. in the institutional church. This period of distrust added nearly twenty years to my own call discernment process before I was finally willing to trust God and begin the path to ordained ministry.

My first husband was eventually ordered to take a series of required psychological tests over the course of several years required by a District Committee on Ministry (DCoM) in the conference where he had been serving. The test results came back with too many red flags, and he was finally discontinued from pastoral leadership and prevented from causing more harm to congregational health and trust. The denomination's lack of trust in him echoed a growing realization of why I had difficulty trusting him in our marriage.

In hindsight, I regret agreeing to ten moves in eight states in fourteen years so he could "shake the dust off of his feet"[3] each time he felt people did not respect his authority. I regret not insisting that it was important that I also answer my call to ministry rather than being subservient to his. I regret not confronting him earlier with his toxic beliefs and actions that hurt our family and many people in the churches he led. Like it is said about hindsight being 20/20, spiritual discernment often shows up after the fact. It took years for me to recognize, name, and stop enabling him for his role in teaching unhealthy theology and causing fractious divisions in the congregations he served (and several other churches he attempted to begin).

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[3] Mark 6:11, NRSV.

During the last three years of our marriage, I began to more clearly recognize the spiritual abuse and try to stop and correct that. At the same time, I finally went to seminary and was appointed to lead my first church alongside my full-time studies and parenting. The congregation had a long and rich history but distrusted the Annual Conference. With a much larger UMC only two blocks away, the smaller church feared the Conference would close them down and force them to merge with what they derisively referred to as the "BUM" ("Big" United Methodist) church. After working to help them focus on renewing their faith and strengthening their mission, one long-time leader told me, "It feels like we've been treading water for decades, but you have helped us to solid ground, and we can finally walk again." Even as they could see that I was struggling to trust my husband and marriage, they began to trust me, my leadership, and even the Conference to an extent.

After three years of serving my first church and graduating from seminary, I was commissioned as a Provisional Elder and appointed to a full-time congregation. Due to my husband's insistence and bitterness from being discontinued in ministry, I transferred from the Northern Illinois Conference to the Wisconsin Conference and accepted an appointment at a newer church start. Despite his unemployment and my willingness to transfer conferences at his demand, my husband still refused to move with me and our children. Even though I was functioning as a full-time single parent and pastor while going through the ordination residency process and Clinical Pastoral Education, I found that not having him and his constant needs and demands made my life remarkably lighter and less stressful than I had experienced since marrying him.

He continued to cross the boundaries I learned and needed to keep with him. A legal separation was the only option left, as it was the only boundary he would legally be forced to honor. Trust requires more than just one party putting in the effort. Through counseling, I learned that establishing healthy boundaries is essential to discerning whether it is possible to rebuild trust with someone. In this case, he chose not to demonstrate trustworthy actions, and our separation was eventually converted into a divorce.

Meanwhile, at my first full-time appointment in Wisconsin, I learned that several seeds of distrust had been previously sown, entangling the future and hopes of this fledgling congregation. Significant funds had not used as they were designated. Consequentially, a few beloved staff members could not be paid, and they and their supporters had left the church. A clergy predecessor also crossed healthy professional boundaries and became emotionally dependent on the congregation. For the next six years, I focused on being transparent, building an Accountable Leadership Board, and strengthening their trust in God, each other, and the church leaders.

This congregational period of renewed trust was also personal, as I was learning to trust again in a new relationship. I wanted my children to see a healthy marriage, and I met a man who was a certified Emotional Intelligence coach. He had sole custody of his four children, who I adored and fit right in with my three. We were married five months after we met and had a “Brady Bunch+” family, complete with six of our seven children’s names starting with “J.” They joined the church I was serving and became active. He became a Certified Lay Servant, played guitar and sang in the praise team, participated and served in the Walk to Emmaus retreats and community.

Three years into our marriage, he and his children supported and moved with me when I was reappointed to a new congregation and city. He found a new job working with unhoused people. I supported and trusted him through his frequent middle-of-the-night emergency calls to help those in distress. Unfortunately, the late-night demands of his ministry set off his anxiety, temper, and illnesses that kept him exhausted and sick in bed for days.

At the same time, I was also leading an effort in our church and city to prepare for the arrival of the first Afghan refugees to Wausau. With extra funds saved from Covid relief, we purchased an old duplex to fix up and offer as affordable housing for our new refugee neighbors. We had a separate bank account for the house with savings reserved for major repairs in the future. I wanted to put new flooring in the kitchen, but my husband stopped me and said the account did not have enough funds. He handled our finances, so when the bank statement arrived, I opened it to see the balance. In addition to a few home materials and repair withdrawals, I saw thousands of dollars were taken out as cash. He claimed his card had been stolen.

Disturbed with doubt, I went to the bank the following day and requested statements from the previous months. The paperwork revealed several large cash withdrawals several times a week. The bank also confirmed that his card had not been stolen. When I returned home and presented him with the facts, my husband blurted out, “I have a drug addiction, and I didn’t want you to find out.” I was shocked! A jumbled mess of thoughts and feelings tangled me in knots. How could I have missed entirely that he was using drugs? Is this something he – and we – could ever overcome? I called the counselor he had been seeing for over a year, and even she was surprised by the news.

Knowing his background in marketing, she told me, “He is a very, very, very good salesman.”

During the ordinarily joyful, expectant, and busy season of Advent, I was also doing forensic accounting and discovered nearly $80,000 in cash withdrawals he had taken from our accounts to fuel a variety of addictions throughout our 4 year marriage. Even more disturbing, I learned he had been extorting young, unhoused women for sexual favors. He not only violated our marriage covenant but also harmed vulnerable women. My trust and our marriage were destroyed.

My first marriage took seventeen years for me to gradually see the emotional and spiritual manipulation that slowly became clear and untenable. It took me about seventeen days to discover most of the dirty secrets that my second husband had kept hidden so well. How could I have missed behaviors so obviously awful? I felt ashamed, disgusted, and blindsided. Though my second husband was not a pastor, he had become a leader in the church. Not only did my trust end in him, but the ability to trust my own discernment also crumbled.

A couple of months later, I received a text from a member of the previous church I served. It was a mug shot of their pastor who had followed me, charged with about twenty counts of child pornography and drug possession. They were blindsided and deeply betrayed by someone supposedly vetted and trained to be trustworthy for the care of their souls. My former church and I shared nightmare-like shocks of broken trust and wondered if and how we could ever rebuild our lives and faith.

Ministry Focus

Problems like these have unfortunately plagued God's people for thousands of years. Pastors have betrayed those they should have cared for. Spiritual abuse has resulted in God's people being broken and scattered. In Ezekiel 34:2-6,10 (NRSV), we hear God telling the prophet to warn the so-called spiritual shepherds of Israel who were harming God's people:

> Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: To the shepherds—thus says the Lord God: Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

Jesus describes selfish spiritual leaders as "wolves in sheep's clothing" in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:12, NRSV): "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." In 2 Peter 2:1-3 (NRSV), they are called false prophets and false teachers who exploit and deceive:

> But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Even so, many will follow their debaucheries, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned. And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words. Their condemnation, pronounced against them long ago, has not been idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

What the Bible describes as selfish shepherds, wolves in sheep's clothing, and lying prophets is what we now call *spiritual abuse*. Spiritual abuse is often characterized by coercion, control, and manipulation. These emotionally abusive tactics become

spiritual abuse when perpetrated by a spiritual authority who defends their unholy behavior with a "divine" rationale.[4] Spiritual abuse is also tied to financial abuse by church leaders. This includes embezzlement of church funds, demanding disproportionate income and benefits, and using manipulative techniques to increase offerings. An even more complex and traumatic form of spiritual abuse comes from clergy sexual abuse. Whether with minors or adults, recent or long ago, this is both soul-crushing and often church-killing. Reporting to the police and connecting to licensed therapists are both essential, especially with sexual abuse.

Another example can be found in churches with staff and volunteer leaders who had a front-row seat to a pastor's harmful ways. Verbally abusive and controlling pastors turn churches into toxic workplaces. An abusive pastor will often take credit for the faithful work of others. Parishioners are pitted against each other by a pastor eager to create a dramatic distraction. Staff and dedicated volunteers live in fear of angry outbursts and have seen their colleagues dismissed without cause and shunned by the church. As pressure mounts, the dysfunctional pastor will increase the expectations and pressure on those who remain. Other tell-tale signs of a spiritually abusive church culture include public shaming and a focus on certain scriptures twisted to increase pastoral power and control. Ultimately, grace is withheld from those without power and perverted to justify the immoral behavior of clergy.

Many pastors have been highly educated and trained in biblical exegesis, theology, church history, and pastoral care. In denominations requiring more extensive ordination requirements, there are usually psychological, financial, relational, and criminal

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[4] Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 5.

background investigations into all seeking to be a pastor. Despite these requisites, there are sadly some clergy whose corrupted character, emotional instability, or spiritual immaturity has escaped scrutiny during a hiring, credentialing, or ordination process. This has caused considerable damage to individuals, congregations, and the communities where they serve.

Regardless of who, what, and when the abuse occurred, there are lingering effects that can last years, if not generations. Even if those directly and acutely affected are no longer in the church, a dysfunctional church culture often forms in response. For instance, divisions form between those who were harmed and those who believe them, and the angry people who are convinced that their pastor was unfairly wronged. The fault line between those who unquestioningly believe their clergy and those who cannot trust the harmful pastor creates the grounds for "church-quakes" to fracture the life and relationships of the church. The "after pastor(s)" arrives, initially unaware but eventually overwhelmed by the complex knot of pain, shame, and distrust in church relationships. It is further complicated when the abuse is hidden as a misguided attempt at congregational preservation.

Trust

Is it possible to rebuild spiritual trust after religious trauma? The New Testament Greek word πίστις (*pistis*) is primarily translated into English as *faith*. Scripture describes *pistis* as a gift from God that justifies us and restores our relationship with God (Romans 3:28, Galatians 2:16, 3:8, 24) and guides how we live (Romans 1:17, 2 Corinthians 5:7, Galatians 2:20, 3:9-11). It is powerful even in small amounts (Mark 4:31, Matthew 17:20,

Luke 17:6). Though it is weak in some (Luke 18:8, Romans 14:1), it always has the potential to increase (Luke 17:5, 2 Corinthians 10:15, 2 Thessalonians 1:3). Hebrews 11 is dedicated to describing the *pistis* of our spiritual ancestors so that we can be inspired by and emulate their *pistis*.[5]

The precedent meaning of *pistis* in Greek is more accurately translated as *trust* or *trustworthy*. Though Biblical examples of *pistis* often refer to *the faith* or *faith in God* in a way that leans toward cognitive belief(s), we will explore how *pistis* can help us better understand the concept of trust. In so doing, rebuilding *pistis* can overcome troubling trust issues that are sadly deepening toward clergy and congregations by the broader culture. According to Gallup and Lifeway Research,

> After dropping 5 points last year [2021], the church suffered another 6-point fall in 2022. Currently, only 31% of Americans say they have quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the church or organized religion, with just 14% expressing a great deal of confidence. Almost 2 in 5 Americans (37%) say they have some confidence in the church, while 29% say they have very little. Another 2% have none, and 1% have no opinion. Gallup first began tracking U.S. adults' confidence in the church as an institution in 1973. In 1975, a high mark of 68% expressed a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the church.[6]

There is a parallel level is growing distrust toward clergy as well:

> 36% of Americans say they rate the honesty and ethical standards of clergy or pastors high or very high—down three points from the previous survey and a new record low. Close to half (48%) give pastors average marks, while 14% say pastors have low or very low ethics and honesty. Previously, Americans said pastors had a high or very high ethical standard and level of honesty, reaching 67% in 1985. After a decade of decline, Americans' views of pastors rebounded

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[5] Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 261-2.

[6] Aaron Earls, "Pastors and Churches Face Historic Lack of Trust," Lifeway Research, accessed November 21, 2022, https://research.lifeway.com/2022/07/12/pastors-and-churches-face-historic-lack-of-trust/.

> through the 1990s and reached 64% in 2001 in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Since then, however, the downward trajectory has only slowed briefly.[7]

It is interesting to see the "trust context" as reported by Lifeway Research:

> Currently, pastors rank in the middle of the pack. Nurses (81%), doctors (67%), grade-school teachers (64%), pharmacists (63%), military officers (61%), police officers (53%), and day care providers (50%) are the professionals at least half of the country view as having high or very high honesty. Judges (38%) slot right before pastors. Clergy are viewed as more ethical than auto mechanics (35%), nursing home operators (27%), lawyers (19%), members of Congress (9%), and lobbyists (5%).[8]

These statistics on the levels of confidence and trust in the clergy's ethical standards and honesty are signs that many people have had their trust betrayed by a pastor. Trust in pastors erodes with every sordid story in the news. My involvement with clergy groups, both within the United Methodist connection and with local ecumenical groups, has opened my eyes to many painful experiences that churches have had with religious trauma caused by previous pastors. Sometimes, it is the immediate predecessor, and other times, spiritual abuse occurred decades earlier. Even when the spiritual abuse took place decades earlier, the effects of the diseased roots are often unidentified yet still deeply detrimental.

Rebuilding Trust

The gift of restored trust in the Church first came to me through several clergy and seminary professors whose theology and pastoral care helped to gradually heal my wary and wounded soul. For instance, a neighboring pastor who was also a licensed professional counselor was the first to name and validate my experience of spiritual abuse

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[7] Earls, Lifeway Research.

[8] Earls, Lifeway Research.

in my first marriage. He explained the many signs of narcissistic personality disorder that he recognized, and gently but firmly told me that I could not "pray it away" or do anything else to stop or change the abuse without setting and enforcing boundaries. I eventually came to see that learning how to set healthy boundaries and stepping away from enabling emotionally and spiritually destructive dysfunction was the most loving response in an abusive marriage.

Learning how to trust again also came through counselors who helped me process and heal from the betrayal in both of my marriages. God's grace and providence have most recently been at work through my neighbor, walking partner, friend, and fellow Christian with a master's degree in business psychology specializing in building high-trust organizations. With frequent conversations regarding the overlap of individual and organizational trust development, a synergistic theme for this doctoral project and dissertation began to emerge.

Having experienced betrayal, emotional abuse, and religious trauma myself, I have become better equipped to help people identify spiritual abuse in their lives. God has gently and gracefully led me in a journey of rebuilding trust after several betrayals. My own experiences with overcoming distrust have allowed me to offer empathetic pastoral care to strengthen and revitalize each congregation. The rapport of our mutual trust issues has helped rebuild trust individually and organizationally. With growing trust as a primary component of faith, the congregations I have served have become spiritually healthier and stronger.

There are a few caveats. First, a significant difference exists between a pastor who has betrayed a church and one who is not a good fit for a particular church. Like all

people, clergy are not interchangeable parts. Sometimes, our skills are not well-aligned with the church we serve, and we would be more fruitful elsewhere. Congregations also have different expectations and needs that one pastor cannot meet. Everyone dreams of a pastor who is a great preacher, pastoral counselor, community leader, worship planner, youth and children connector, social media influencer, meeting moderator, hospital and shut-in visitor, mission developer, fundraiser, and innovator. Different pastors will do some things on that list well, but not most and certainly not all.

The second caveat is that pastors are at higher risk of being falsely accused of misconduct. Many faithful pastors have been charged without any evidence, put on leave, and even dismissed without cause. After thorough investigations, it is often confirmed that the accuser had entirely made up the story for attention. Incidents like these often haunt clergy, their families, and churches despite their innocence.

A third caveat describes an inverse problem. Sometimes, churches can be toxic toward pastors. When I was nineteen and serving as a summer intern at a Lutheran church near La Crosse, I was shown a list of churches in their synod looking for a pastor. One after another, my mentor told me stories of the pastors these churches had chewed up and spit out. Sometimes, it is a sign of unaddressed spiritual abuse in the distant past. However, there are many other possible problematic root causes of congregational dysfunction. This series cannot address this related issue, but it deserves to be better understood and stopped.

Conclusion

People in congregations often place their trust for their spiritual care in their pastor's hands. A relationship of trust is developed as they learn from sermons, worship, Bible studies, serving on various committees and teams under the pastor's invitation and direction, and meeting for pastoral care through times of grief, illness, and challenges. The emotional and spiritual intimacy between a pastor and parishioner can be inspiring and empowering, but it is harmful whenever a clergyperson abuses their power. Confused and conflicted, church members are often left sifting through the rubble of what is or is no longer true about the faith they learned from the abusive pastor. In the aftermath, spiritually abused people become cynical and suspicious toward other clergy, churches, and the Christian message and mission.

Though the word *trust* is ubiquitous, objectively describing or quantifying it seems difficult. Given the inherent challenges of attempting to restore broken trust, is it even possible to re-establish broken trust? In his book *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen M.R. Covey states, "Contrary to what most people believe, trust is not some soft, illusive quality that you either have or you don't; rather trust is a pragmatic, tangible, actionable asset that you can create - much faster than you probably think possible."[9] He continues,

> Simply put, trust means confidence. The opposite of trust - distrust - is suspicion. When you trust people, you have confidence in them - in their integrity and in their abilities. When you distrust people, you are suspicious of them - of their integrity, their agenda, their capabilities, or their track record.[10]

Though Stephen M.R. Covey writes and teaches about trust as a business leader, clergy and congregations can likely find and apply what he teaches as being biblically

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[9] Stephen M.R. Covey and Rebecca R. Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (New York, NY: Free Press, Simon and Schuster, 2018), 2.

[10] Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 5.

consistent. With the reality of low trust levels in society toward clergy and churches, there is much work needed in restoring trustworthiness. Covey succinctly explains,

> Trust is a function of two things: character and competence. Character includes your integrity, your motive, your intent with people. Competence includes your capabilities, your skills, your results, your track record. And both are vital.[11]

Individuals and congregations who have experienced spiritual abuse often find themselves hurt and confused. In addition to the emotional challenge of recovering from abuse, the spiritual nature of it makes it even more difficult. This study focuses on spiritual abuse as a complex type of emotional abuse, often characterized by coercion, control, and manipulation. These emotionally abusive tactics become spiritual abuse when perpetrated by a spiritual authority who defends such behavior with a "divine" rationale.[12] This not only wounds one's emotions but also damages a person's understanding of and relationship with God and trust in others who represent God.

Spiritual abuse can also be present in other forms, such as sexual and financial abuse. However, the scope of this project and dissertation focuses on the emotional forms of spiritual abuse. This kind of abuse is often difficult to identify and articulate, particularly when someone has been manipulated through deception. Once awareness and understanding of the problematic reality of an abusive pastor's behavior is exposed and confronted, there are frequently used defensive tactics by the abuser and their supporters. Learning from the experiences of my congregations and personal life might help other pastors and congregations alike to recognize signs of spiritual abuse. This is the first step in being able to stop, learn, and then heal from religious trauma.

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[11] Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 29-30.

[12] Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 5.

In the following pages, we will explore a biblical foundation that shows us how and who to trust as pastoral leaders. As we redevelop our skills to assess and trust pastors wisely, our ultimate goal is to allow our faith in God and fellowship with others to grow deeper. Stephen Covey's sage advice to rebuild trust based on character and competency has roots in words of Scripture written almost two millennia ago, in a letter to a church leader named Titus.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Though aeronautical engineers can reassuringly explain why flying is the safest way to cover many miles, sometimes people have difficulty feeling trust in booking a flight or boarding a plane. Their caution and fears have only been worsened by a recent series of life-threatening mid-air problems on Boeing airplanes. Doors, panels, and wheels flew off mid-flight. Two Boeing whistleblowers were found dead.[1] People are understandably afraid to fly in Boeing airplanes, which comprise 43% of the commercial aircraft in the United States.[2] The frightening decline of safety and quality control at Boeing led to a necessary shake-up at the company. On April 1, 2024, business leadership experts Anne Morriss and Frances Frei gave a TED talk called "*Unsolicited Advice: Boeing & How to Lead in a Crisis"* on their podcast *Fixable*. Ten minutes in, Frei recommended three elements that Boeing – and any organization – should adopt in order to recommit to quality: "You have to honor the past. We have to have a clear and compelling

[1] Will Daniel, "Another Boeing Whistleblower is Dead – This Time a Healthy 45-year-old Who Battled a Sudden, Severe Infection," *Fortune*, May 2, 2024, https://fortune.com/2024/05/02/boeing-whistleblower-dead-joshua-dean-45-sudden-severe-infection/.

[2] J. Kasper Oestergaard, "An Overview of the U.S. Commercial Aircraft Fleet," *Forecast International*, November 6, 2018, https://dsm.forecastinternational.com/2018/11/06/an-overview-of-the-u-s-commercial-aircraft-fleet/.

change mandate. And we need a rigorous and optimistic way forward. It's always what you do in a crisis."[3]

Boeing had been known for their excellent quality for over a hundred years, with the slogan "If ain't Boeing, I'm not going." Engineers had run the company, who were focused on safety and quality performance. But then their Chief Financial Officer became their CEO. The love of money grew as a root of all kinds of evil. For Boeing to become trustworthy again, they would need to recommit to putting an engineer at the helm. In their Ted Talk, Morriss and Frei explained that companies driven by finances and profits will inevitably have quality problems. They also used the example of hospital systems, whose quality is always better when the CEO is a physician rather than a Finance Director. Frei explained, "CFOs can be great CEOs, but only if they have more reverence for the non-financial thing than anyone else in the company."[4]

There are many congregations that might feel like their wheels or doors have come off, and their faith in the plane or pilot is plummeting. The fears and stress often add pressure from parishioners and denominational leaders to focus on numbers – bucks in (offering) plates and butts in pews, as the saying goes. A pastor with unresolved issues can find themselves plumping their pride and pockets, instead of being a prophetic voice protecting the vulnerable. Trustworthy clergy, like the best CEO's of aircraft companies or hospitals, need to be identified as having true reverence for God. Church leaders and congregations alike must renew their sacred call to ministry through the necessary evidence of character, competency, and compassion.

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[3] Frances Frei and Anne Morris, hosts, "Unsolicited Advice: Boeing and How to Lead in a Crisis," (transcript), *Fixable* (podcast), April 1, 2024, https://www.ted.com/podcasts/fixable/unsolicited-advice-boeing-how-to-lead-in-a-crisis-transcript, 10:06.

[4] Frei and Morris, "Unsolicited Advice," 17:25.

Historical Context

In a first-century version of a Ted Talk called the Letter to Titus, the Apostle Paul described how to identify who has the character and competence needed to lead a church. To better understand the context, Paul assigned and instructed Titus to organize and oversee churches on the island of Crete. Now part of the country of Greece, this island is one hundred and sixty miles wide and thirty-seven miles north to south.

Crete was known for having a hundred cities and boasted thirty-five city-states during the Hellenistic period, which was lowered to about twenty city-states during the Roman period. This Roman rule eventually brought a cease-fire to frequent wars between the cities of Crete, stirred by their notoriously fierce rivalries.[5] The term "Cretan" became synonymous with "liar" throughout the Greco-Roman empire. This island was known as the birthplace of the mythical Greek god Zeus, famous for a half-bull, half-human monster called a *Minotaur*, and Cretans worshipped their emperor as a universal savior.[6]

Titus was entrusted to transform the character and reputation of this island, and it started with identifying the right kind of leaders for churches. Because the gospel message was newly proclaimed and unestablished in a culture that was hostile to a message of grace and truth, some false teachers and interpretations distorted the Good News of Christ. Paul's letter to Titus outlines his primary responsibilities, including what to be and do (1:5-16) and what to say (2:1-3:11).

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[5] I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles,* International Critical Commentary (London, UK: T & T Clark, 1999), 152.

[6] Daniel Akin, *Living Doctrine: The Book of Titus* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 5.

The Pauline letters of 1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus are often collectively called the "Pastoral Epistles" because they focus on identifying and appointing appropriate and effective church leadership. This designation is thought to originate in 1703 with D.N. Berdot, along with a subsequent reference in 1726 in P. Anton of Halle's series of lectures called "The Pastoral Epistles" based on these three books.[7] The term "pastoral" is not entirely accurate when applied to Titus and Timothy as individual leaders who functioned more as apostles than pastors. However, their combined message is a call for Christ-like character and competence in church leaders. These primary traits are the precursors to developing trust, as emphasized by Stephen M.R. Covey.[8]

These pastoral letters also include guidelines for apostles and networks of congregations in adequately identifying and instructing pastoral leaders. Titus 1:5-9 has been selected as the focus of this exegesis, but 1st Timothy 3:1-10 has a very similar list of requisites for bishops and deacons. Titus and 1st Timothy were likely written after Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. 2nd Timothy was possibly penned during Paul's second and more severe Roman imprisonment.[9]

Reading and interpreting the Pastoral Epistles as a whole, the contextual blend of Timothy's urban Ephesus and Titus' less-civilized Crete creates a cultural contrast. This indicates that even different contexts on both ends of the societal spectrum fare best with

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[7] Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2016), 1015.

[8] Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 29.

[9] Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 1016.

similar instruction in matters of church leadership.[10] Wall and Steele explain the consistent need for clergy character and competence in a variety of contexts,

> Paul's gospel and his instructions to congregations and their leaders do not change from place to place. God is Savior of both and all in equal measure. And even slight differences detected in the instructions of 1 Timothy and Titus may indicate the dynamic adaptability of the Pauline apostolate to different social settings.[11]

Though all of Scripture is intended to be interpreted and applied to faith and life, the letter to Titus was initially directed as a mandate for Christian Cretans. It taught their first pastor/bishop, and now can teach us, what to accept and reject in terms of characteristics and competencies of Christian leaders.[12] Daniel Akin poetically summarizes the book of Titus:

> This short, three-chapter, forty-six-verse letter weds the Christian sonnet of doctrine and deeds, belief and behavior, conduct and creed beautifully. This message penned to an apostolic delegate in a dire situation proves a lasting charge to pastors and churches today.[13]

Titus is described as a "spiritual Navy Seal, who could go into the hard places and set things in order, get things fixed, make things right."[14] Paul describes bringing Titus to Jerusalem in Galatians 2. The trip, but not Titus, is referred to in Acts 15:2. Titus is Paul's example to the Galatian church that an uncircumcised Gentile could be a genuine believer in the gospel[15]:

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[10] Robert Wall and Richard B Steele. *1 And 2 Timothy and Titus*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2012), 343.

[11] Wall and Steele, *1 And 2 Timothy and Titus*, 343.

[12] Craig Blomberg and Darlene M Seal, *From Pentecost to Patmos, 2nd Edition: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2021), 10.

[13] Akin, *Living Doctrine*, 7.

[14] Akin, *Living Doctrine*, 5

[15] Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament: The Abridged Edition*, ed, Marion L Soards (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 233.

> Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.[16]

Paul also referred fondly to Titus seven times in his second letter to the Corinthian church. We can see how Titus' actions and attitudes aligned with the emerging ethic of Christian leadership:

> …but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there.[17]
> But God, who consoles the downcast, consoled us by the arrival of Titus,[18]
>
> In this we have found consolation. In addition to our own consolation, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his mind has been set at rest by all of you.[19]
>
> …so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you.[20]
>
> As for Titus, he is my partner and coworker in your service; as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ.[21]
>
> I urged Titus to go and sent the brother with him. Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same footsteps?[22]

Two thousand years after Paul entrusted Titus to identify and train exemplary church leaders, denominations and individual congregations still struggle to ensure that the character and competency of clergy candidates are correctly assessed. Learning about necessary and biblical pastoral qualifications will help us strengthen our ability to recognize and trust emotionally healthy pastors. Conversely, it will also empower

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[16] Galatians 2:1-3 (NRSV).

[17] 2 Corinthians 2:13 (NRSV).

[18] 2 Corinthians 7:6 (NRSV).

[19] 2 Corinthians 7:13 (NRSV).

[20] 2 Corinthians 8:6 (NRSV).

[21] 2 Corinthians 8:23 (NRSV).

[22] 2 Corinthians 12:18 (NRSV).

authorities in the church to reject the leadership of those whose character is inconsistent with the virtues necessary for Christ-like leadership.

Exegetical Research

The focus of Titus 1:5-9 is to explore what characteristics and skills were required of church leaders in Crete to build a healthy church in a sin-sick culture. By looking at the cultural and linguistic contexts of these five verses, we can gain a deeper understanding of what this passage meant to the original audience. In addition, we can glean a more meaningful interpretation and application for Christ's Church today.

I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you:[23]

Exactly how and when the Good News of Christ first arrived in Crete remains a mystery. A plausible explanation of how the gospel came to Crete is a brief reference in Acts 2:11, when Peter preached to a diverse crowd of Jewish pilgrims gathered for the Feast of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit's presence, in the form of a rushing wind and tongues of fire, first empowered the early Church with spiritual gifts. It is noted that residents of Crete were among the people there, and upon their return to Crete, it is possible that they were the first to establish churches. If any such congregations were planted and still existed when Paul wrote to Titus, Bray posits they were likely informal, unstructured, and lacking in sound theology and/or Christian practice.[24]

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[23] Titus 1:5, (NRSV).

[24] Gerald Lewis Bray, *The Pastoral Epistles: An International Theological Commentary*, First ed. T&T Clark International Theological Commentary (New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2019), 474.

The only mention of Crete in the book of Acts, other than the Cretans in Jerusalem at Pentecost, is when Paul was a prisoner on a ship to Rome that stopped in a harbor called Fair Havens in Crete. However, Acts 27:8-13 infers that the ship did not stay there long nor that Paul was allowed to leave the ship or preach to any locals.[25] A related theory is that Paul spent unrecorded time preaching and planting churches on Crete after his first imprisonment in Rome, particularly because of the allusion to Paul leaving Titus behind in 1:5. Legend has it that at some point, Titus was the bishop of a capital city on Crete called Gortyn.[26] Whether true or not, verse five's linguistic tense and tone imply that it was not intended for Titus to be left behind in Crete indefinitely. His time was limited, and he aimed to identify and prepare a network of qualified church leaders.[27]

Though we may not know the Christian origins of Crete, Titus was to focus not only on completing whatever work was unfinished when Paul left Crete but also on correcting Christians, especially their leaders, who had become *dis*ordered.[28] As Titus 1:5 says, he was to "put in order what remained to be done," but it is arguable that translation does not carry the weight of the meaning. There was likely more than a little ecclesiastic disorganization. Rather, many theological and moral wrongs probably needed to be confronted and corrected.

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[25] Graham Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles:1-2 Timothy, Titus: An Exegetical and Contextual Commentary*, India Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 74.

[26] Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 74.

[27] Paul Jeon, *To Exhort and Reprove: Audience Response to the Chiastic Structures of Paul's Letter to Titus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 87.

[28] Jeon, *To Exhort and Reprove*, 87.

Titus was left in Crete not only to "put in order what remained to be done" but also to "appoint elders in every town." Paul authorized Titus to accomplish the goal of putting things in order, including appointing elders. Similar to United Methodist elders who are ordained to a lifetime of Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service, Titus was entrusted with ordering clergy and congregations for the mission and ministry of making transformed and transforming disciples of Christ. Within a culture centered on intergenerational households, the "family of faith" is both metaphorical and practical as a model for ordering God's household. Just as a family name carried honor or shame, Paul insisted that the family of Christ build and preserve a reputation of honor for God's glory so that others would want to be welcomed and included in such a household of faith.[29]

Paul recognized that elders, πρεσβυτέρους, *presbyterous*[30] were needed in every town to oversee the church. The Greek term refers to mature men with experience which has given them wisdom.[31] The feminine form of this word is notably absent but not surprising within the cultural constraints of the context. The descriptions and lists of pastoral qualifications in the Pastoral Epistles are certainly inspired and relevant to the needs of today's congregations. Still, there are immediate questions and concerns that arise with a literal reading.

A narrow interpretation of Titus 1:6 could lead to an assumption that qualified church leaders must be male, married, never divorced or remarried, and surrounded by compliant, God-fearing children. It can be argued that these were seen in that historical and cultural context as initial evidence of being able to successfully lead a church family.

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[29] Wall, *1 And 2 Timothy and Titus*, 386.

[30] "Greek Text Analysis, Titus 1:5," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/text/titus/1-5.htm.

[31] "Strong's Greek: 4245," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/4245.htm.

The following verses, 7-9, describe the character and competencies of the leaders God authorizes to serve Christ's Church.

Feminist and Asian theologians Mitzi Smith and Suk Kim Yung suggest that the gender, marital, and parental status insisted on in the letters to Titus and Timothy are inconsistent with the writings of other biblical texts, which have a more positive view of women in church leadership, supports allowing divorce in cases of adultery or abandonment, and advocates for interdependent rather than patriarchal marriages.[32] Therefore, we seek to understand the spirit of the instructions to Titus rather than the gender, marital, and familial limitations likely imposed due to cultural bias rather than divine constraints.

In addition to understanding that we do not need to limit pastors or bishops by their gender, it is helpful to recognize that elders are not necessarily qualified by their age either. Rather, elders are identified by the character and competency requirements described in verses 6-9. The twice-repeated word "blameless" is the overarching requirement. ἀνέγκλητος (*anenklētos)* is a combination of *an-* "not" and *-egkaléō*, "making legal charges against someone in a court of law"; properly, not convictable when a person is properly scrutinized.[33]

Blameless is then described by their familial situation: married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious.[34] "Married only once" may be interpreted in multiple ways, such as a prohibition against polygamy,

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[32] Mitzi Smith and Yung Suk Kim, *Toward Decentering the New Testament: A Reintroduction* (La Vergne, TN: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 291.

[33] "Strong's Greek: 410," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/410.htm.

[34] Titus 1:6, (NRSV).

divorce, or remarriage. However, this requisite was uncommon in Hellenistic cultural expectations of leaders.[35] In a context where polygamy was not commonly practiced, it is unlikely that the audience would have assumed Paul was prohibiting polygamy.[36] It is also unlikely that Paul disproved of either (re)marriage or singleness.[37] There are no Biblical prohibitions but rather encouragement of (levirate) remarriage of a widow or widower. In 1 Corinthians 7:38 Paul writes, "So then, he who marries his fiancée does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do better." Roman Catholic theologians have made a case for unmarried clergy for over a millennium.

Ruling out these possible interpretations, a Greco-Roman concept of *"univira",* a "one husband woman," often written on the tombstones of faithful women by their widowers, illuminates what is likely the best interpretation. Paul advocates for equal expectations of gender faithfulness with the converse imperative of a "one-wife husband."[38] Given these factors, the *married only once* description can be best interpreted as being faithful in marriage and for single people to live with relational integrity.

Understanding this cultural context helps to explain Paul's understanding of a "blameless" elder and how it extends to the beliefs and behaviors of their children: 'whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious.' The children of an elder are expected to be believers, or in Greek, having πιστά *(pista*), which

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[35] Gerhard Krodel and Paul Sampley, eds., *The Deutero-Pauline Letters: Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus*, Proclamation Commentaries (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1994), 85.

[36] Jeon, *To Exhort and Reprove*, 91.

[37] Jeon, *To Exhort and Reprove*, 92.

[38] Jeon, *To Exhort and Reprove*, 93.

describes being persuaded, trustworthy, and faithful.[39] It could be interpreted as either meaning the elder's children trust in Christ, are themselves trustworthy, or both. Given the relatively recent introduction of Christianity to Crete and the collective culture that was rarely thought of in individualistic terms, it was likely premature to expect that each family member professed faith in Christ.[40] Gerald Bray explains that Paul's concern

> was that they should not bring shame on the family by their misbehaviour. If they were open to the charge of debauchery (*asōtia*) or if they were insubordinate (*anhypotakta*), the parents would be disgraced and the results for the family's reputation could be catastrophic.[41]

Another dimension of the need for "faithful" children is how it reflected the parents' faithfulness. This is still seen today primarily in Eastern communally based cultures, in contrast to the more individualistic Western cultures. In the patriarchal world of Paul and Titus, the authority of fathers over their children in all matters, including religious, was final. It was assumed that the spirituality and morality of the parents were passed on to their children, as much as physical traits are genetically inherited.[42]

Paul used two characteristics to describe the antithesis of children who are faithful, trustworthy, and/or persuaded by the Gospel. ἀσωτίας (*asōtias*), *(a-*= "without" and *-sṓzō* = "save") is translated as *debauchery* in the NRSV, describing wild living and a wasted life as seen in a prodigal child whose excessive behavior leads to physical, moral, and spiritual poverty.[43] The Greek word translated as *rebellious* is ἀνυπότακτα, or *anypotakta* (from *an-* "not" and *-hypokritḗs*, "under God's arrangement"). With a Hellenistic meaning

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[39] "Strong's Greek: 4103," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/4103.htm.

[40] Jeon, *To Exhort and Reprove*, 93-94.

[41] Bray, *The Pastoral Epistles,* 479.

[42] Wall, *1 And 2 Timothy and Titus*, 352.

[43] "Strong's Greek: 810," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/810.htm.

of insubordination[44], the biblical significance describes someone who is unwilling to align with God's will and who has a defiant rather than a grateful and trusting relationship with God.[45]

Many stories in Scripture describe God's children who grumbled, complained, defied, and denied God's goodness, grace, and authority. Though there certainly are children who develop this way because of negligent or abusive parents, it cannot be presumed that rebellious children are indicative of a parent who is unable to model and teach healthy relationships in the church. Most parents, even God, understand that each child is unique and self-willed. Given that Jesus told a parable describing God as a Father to such a prodigal child in Luke 15, it is doubtful that God would disqualify an elder for having a child who refused God's grace and gift of salvation.

Interpreting this passage as Paul's idealized and literal expectations of how the spouse and children of elders believe and behave lacks nuance and assumes more authoritarian control than is acceptable by many today. However, it is understandable why these requirements were established for church leaders in the cultural context of Crete. It was primarily a witness to those who had not yet been invited to trust in Christ. Leaders of good repute admired for how their character helped their families to flourish were much more likely to be trusted to lead the spiritual flourishing of their community.[46]

To what extent should the beliefs and/or behaviors of children of clergy now be expected to align with the qualifications in Titus? There are rarely cultures today with the kind of patriarchal power there was when Paul wrote the letter to Titus. Therefore, we

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[44] Jeon, *To Exhort and Reprove*, 94.

[45] "Strong's Greek: 506," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/506.htm.

[46] Jeon, *To Exhort and Reprove*, 95.

examine related implications. The primary is the responsibility of raising children with faith-based ethics and responsibility consistently modeled by the parents. Though our modern culture usually resists hierarchical and forced respect, in the past, it was seen as necessary to preserve the order and harmony of the family unit and society as a whole.[47]

Even if outward appearances indicate a well-ordered and functioning household, one's family life is not always a complete or accurate reflection of a person's integrity and skills to lead a household of God. Titus 1:7-8 focuses first on explaining red flags to warn and then signposts of a grace-filled life to follow in godly leaders. As N.T. Wright states, "It's no good being a fine preacher, a wise pastor and competent administrator if, every few days, you fly off the handle and yell at people. It's no good being a great church organizer and leader if the way you accomplish your goals is by bullying."[48] Likewise, Titus must enforce a boundary to protect God's people from leaders who lack moral consistency.

For a bishop as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain,[49]

We shift in focus from elders and their families to a bishop, or ἐπίσκοπον (*episkopon*), also commonly translated as *overseer*. The Greek cognate is based on *epí-*, "on" which intensifies *-skopós*, "look intently". It means understanding and caring for all from a higher perspective, much like a shepherd is positioned to keep a watchful eye on

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[47] Bray, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 480.

[48] N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*. Volume: the Pastoral Letters. For Everyone: A Major New Series of Guides to the Books of the New Testament (London, UK: SPCK, 2004), 84.

[49] Titus 1:7, (NRSV).

protecting and providing for the sheep.[50] This word implies a faithful and compassionate spiritual leader.

Though the Greek words for Elder and Bishop are different, they are believed to have the same function in the early church. Christopher Beeley notes, "These two terms are often used interchangeably; and while there may have been a distinct supervisor (bishop) among the group of overseer-elders, they are not demarcated as a radically distinct office."[51] One distinction is that the term "bishop" is used in the singular. In contrast, the term "elder" is written in the plural form.[52] Raymond Collins states that an "elder and overseer are the same person. The Elder is one's status, the Overseer is one's function."[53] Benjamin Merkle explains how the original Greek text confirms this as well.[54]

The office of Bishop is correlated to the term οἰκονόμον (oikonomon), or steward. Based on the Greek terms *oikos*-, "house, household," and -*nemō*, "to allot, apportion," it refers to a household manager or steward of a property and the people (family and

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[50] "Strong's Greek: 1985," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/1985.htm.

[51] Christopher Beeley, *Leading God's People: Wisdom from the Early Church for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 3.

[52] Krodel, *The Deutero-Pauline Letters*, 81.

[53] Raymond Collins, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: A Commentary*, First ed., The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 322.

[54] "Perhaps the most convincing passage demonstrating that the terms elder and overseer are interchangeable is Titus 1:5-7. In verse 5, Paul writes to Titus, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders [πρεσβυτέρους] in every town as I directed you." When Paul gives the qualifications in verse 7, however, he replaces the term "elder" with "overseer." He continues, "For an overseer [τὸν ἐπίσκοπον], as God's steward, must be above reproach." Here, as in 1 Timothy 3:2, the singular form with the article is used. The previous reference to "elders" in Titus 1:5, however, demonstrates that a single bishop is not what Paul has in mind. Therefore, in 1 Timothy 3:2, when Paul uses the singular ἐπίσκοπος with the article, the best option is to interpret the article as generic: each individual potential candidate must meet the various qualifications." Benjamin Merkle, *Exegetical Gems from Biblical Greek: A Refreshing Guide to Grammar and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 43-44.

servants) within.[55] I.H. Marshall defines *steward* as "a person appointed by a landowner to administer his estates and oversee his workers, representing the master and having full powers granted by him and answerable [only] to the master for his conduct of the property…"[56] The Hebrew equivalent, *mebaqqer,* described those overseers of a community such as Qumran who were entrusted to determine how to best care for the poor and whom to welcome (or not) into the community. There is also a parallel between political and spiritual overseers, who have inherent financial responsibilities to best use the collective resources of the social and/or spiritual community.[57]

Multiple parallels between verses six and seven are notable: the word *blameless* precedes the list as the comprehensive virtue, followed by a list of vices that indicate a person is not aligned in right relationship with God and unqualified to lead God's church. The first disqualifier is arrogance: αὐθάδη, *authadē,* derived from *autos-*, "self" and -*hēdomai*, "to gratify self, be indulgent".[58] This description of a self-interested hedonist is diametrically opposed to the character of one who is called to love and serve God and God's people. The second vice is being quick-tempered, from the Greek ὀργίλος (*orgílos),* which means "prone to anger and harbor resentment, nurturing long-standing anger (prejudice, bitterness)."[59] This is the only time this Greek word occurs in all of Scripture yet has been overlooked to the detriment of the health of Christ's Church and its leaders.

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[55] "Strong's Greek: 3623," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/3623.htm.

[56] Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 160.

[57] Krodel, *The Deutero-Pauline Letters*, 81.

[58] "Strong's Greek: 829," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/829.htm.

[59] "Strong's Greek: 3711," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/3711.htm.

The third prohibition is against, translated literally, “being next to or in the presence of wine”: πάροινον, *paroinon.*[60] Since Jesus himself defied this prohibition when he turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana and shared wine with his disciples at the Last Supper, it can be understood that the presence or moderate consumption of wine is not the problem, but rather the addiction or abuse of alcohol that is the real concern. Often related to the effects of such addictions is the fourth warning against those who are violent: πλήκτην, *plēktēn*, meaning “a striker, contentious person, brawler.”[61]

The fifth and final warning is about those who are “greedy for gain”: αἰσχροκερδῆ, *aischrokerdē,* which is used only twice in Scripture, the other time in the list of pastoral qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:8.[62] It is a combination of the words *aischros-* (shameful or disgraceful)[63] and *-kerdos,* (profit acquired through "faith-trading.")[64] This “disgraceful gain from faith-trading” is the opposite of what Christ modeled in his life and said in Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” (NRSV)

This list of disqualifying characteristics eliminates many possible leaders. However. there are also positive character traits that need to be evidenced in the lives of potential and practicing elders and bishops. *“[They] must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, self-controlled, upright, devout, and restrained”.* The Greek word translated as

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[60] “Strong’s Greek: 3943,” BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/3943.htm.

[61] “Strong’s Greek: 4131,” BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/4131.htm.

[62] “Strong’s Greek: 146,” BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/146.htm.

[63] “Strong’s Greek: 150,” BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/150.htm.

[64] “Strong’s Greek: 2771,” BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/2771.htm.

hospitable, φιλόξενον (*philoxenon),* is more literally translated as *loving the stranger*.[65] The opposite of xenophobia, the *fear of strangers* (those who are from a different culture) is the first and possibly foremost quality for church leaders. Pastors must love and warmly welcome people who are different than we are, and model that to their congregations as well.. The mission and message of Christ has always transcended racial, ethnic, and cultural distinctions to be good news to all people. As a leader of the church, one must live that truth in word and deed as a witness for and with people being transformed from being xenophobic to a church characterized by philoxenia.

A "lover of goodness", φιλάγαθον (*philagathon),* is another Greek word unique to Titus in all of Scripture. It is a compound of the words *phílos-*, "a friend," and -agathós, "inherently good," and it refers to someone who loves whom and what God loves.[66] The multi-faceted theological beauty of this word is that God is the One who calls all of creation "good." It is much greater than the relative first step of a "good, better, and best" thought process. To compare, the pervasive Hebrew word טוֹב *(towb)* is translated 562 times in the Old Testament to describe what is good, pleasant, or agreeable from the very genesis of the world.[67] Applied to this passage, a leader of the church is expected to understand not only that God is good, but that all God makes is inherently good. Even though it is clear to understand why a bishop must be a 'lover of the good', there is ambiguity to how to define and apply 'good' in various contexts. The Greek word *agathos* infers moral and spiritual goodness, whereas the near-synonym, *kalos,* focuses on external goodness (beauty), which could be only skin deep. With intentional

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[65] "Strong's Greek: 5382," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/5382.htm.

[66] "Strong's Greek: 5358," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/5358.htm.

[67] "Strong's Hebrew: 2896," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2896.htm.

vagueness yet spiritual depth, being a 'lover of goodness' can be interpreted as having an attitude that sees the best and recognizes God's fingerprint in everything good.[68]

Being self-controlled is another understandable requisite for church leaders. The Greek word σώφρονα, (*sōphrona*) is derived from *sōos*-, "sound, safe" and *-phrḗn*, "inner outlook" which regulates outward behavior.[69] It describes someone who is self-regulated, temperate, and balanced. This word is only found four times in Scripture; thrice in Titus, and once in 1 Timothy 3:2 in the comparable list of qualifications for church leaders. The *sophrona* type of self-control focuses on dimensions of heightened self-awareness, sensibility, and wisdom needed by those entrusted with leadership in the church.

The fourth descriptor of a model church leader is upright, or in Greek, δίκαιον (*dikaion),* primarily translated as *righteous* and *just*.[70] It describes someone who is aligned "right up" to God's justice and righteousness. The interconnectedness between righteous and holy is summarized as "fair" and emphasizes how an overseer leads through God's justice more than the inner quality of being righteous.[71] The fifth and related word translated as *devout* is ὅσιον *(hosion)* and illuminates what is sanctioned by a higher law (especially divine law or truth) and deserves reverence or devotion.[72]

The sixth and final Greek word often translated as *restrained,* ἐγκρατῆ, *enkratē*, is a near-synonym of the aforementioned *self-controlled (sōphrona)*. It is also translated as self-control in the Galatians 5:22-23 list of the fruit of the Spirit. This has a similar, yet

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[68] Bray, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 483.

[69] "Strong's Greek: 4998," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/4998.htm.

[70] "Strong's Greek: 1342," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/1342.htm.

[71] Bray, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 484.

[72] "Strong's Grek: 3741," https://biblehub.com/greek/3741.htm.

distinct meaning based on *en-*, "in the sphere of" and *-krátos*, "dominion, mastery". It is a type of self-control expected of all believers characterized as coming from within but not only by one's own limited power.[73] Most of the time it refers to having control over sexual and physical appetites, though in a broader sense, *egkrateia* is considered evidence that the Holy Spirit is empowering a person despite the weakness of their self-will.

The Elder/Bishop qualification list in Titus 1:7 of five characteristics to avoid and six character traits to expect in verse 8 culminates in competencies to enact in Titus 1:9, "holding tightly to the trustworthy word of the teaching, so that he may be able both to exhort with sound instruction and to refute those who contradict it."[74] The "trustworthy" message to be guarded and spread by the Elders and Bishops is the very reason they must demonstrate trustworthy lives. The Greek word πιστός (*pistos)* connotes faithful and reliable[75] and parallels the reference in Titus 1:6 to the children of Elders being believers *(pista).* When it comes to developing or rebuilding faith, trustworthy leaders are essential for helping people trust in God and the church.

It follows that trustworthy leaders are also identified by competently being able to "hold tightly to the trustworthy word of teaching".[76] The question of the difference between the "word" and the "teaching" is notable. Simpson suggests that the "word" is a message taught by the elder, and the "teaching" is what becomes the apostolic tradition of orthodox Christian beliefs. If both terms are interpreted as reinforcing synonyms, then the

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[73] "Strong's Greek: 1466," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/1466.htm.

[74] Titus 1:9 (NRSV)

[75] "Strong's Greek: 4103," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/4103.htm.

[76] Titus 1:9, NRSV

meaning signifies a "devotion to the task of proclaiming."[77] Looking through a metaphorical window into the household of faith, the combination of *pistos* and *logos*, "faithful word," describes both the way and means of faith formation in a congregation.[78] The result is a faith resistant to false prophets and teachings, much like a healthy body is able to resist infections.

The significant requisite of living a blameless life is, therefore, necessary for the twin responsibilities of both exhorting and refuting those who attempt to engage the good news of Christ. The Greek word translated as "exhort" or "encourage" in some versions, παρακαλεῖν, *(parakalein),* is formed from *pará-,* "from close-beside" and *-kaléō,* "to call". It connotes being close-up and personal in a compassionate and comforting way.[79] This is also a particularly meaningful biblical name for the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, as a personification of this verb.

The final skill needed by church leaders is to be able to refute those who contradict the "trustworthy word of teaching." The Greek word translated as *refute* is ἐλέγχειν (*elenchein),* from the word *elégxō* which means "to convince with solid, compelling evidence, especially to expose."[80] Who is to be refuted? Those who *contradict* Christ's message. The Greek meaning of ἀντιλέγω (*antilegó)* is from the root words *antí-*, "opposite to" and *-légō*, "speaking to a conclusion" and it describes those who are argumentatively voicing opposition.[81] This describes more of a verbal

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[77] Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 77.

[78] Wall, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 352-3.

[79] "Strong's Greek: 3870," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/3870.htm.

[80] "Strong's Greek: 1651," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/1651.htm.

[81] "Strong's Greek: 483," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/483.htm.

contradiction than an inconsistency in action. What is involved in refuting those who contradict the trustworthy word of teaching? It is more than a stifling rebuke and becomes a correction that helps convince those who are mistaken in their beliefs and teachings in a way that brings them to accept the truth. This same verb is used later in Titus 1:13, which expresses the goal of becoming sound in the faith.[82]

Compassionate Clergy with Character and Competence

The Church needs good shepherds who, like the Good Shepherd, will simultaneously feed and protect the flock. This involves more than a didactic teaching of truth but being a living reflection of grace and truth that leads to faith, hope, and love. As Jesus warned, there are some who refuse to comprehend or accept their need and God's gift of grace. Like wolves, they divide, scatter, and devour the flock. A wise shepherd (church leader) knows how to recognize danger and deception and protect the sheep (the church), all while ensuring that they are exhibiting grace and truth as a model for those who are learning to live by grace through faith.[83]

As evidenced about two thousand years ago by the Apostle Paul's directions to Titus, church leaders must have their compassion, character and competency assessed for integrity to safeguard the mission and witness of Christ's church. Emotional and spiritual training and maturity is essential for clergy to successfully manage the stress of life and ministry. Without healthy humility and pastoral boundaries, even well-intentioned pastors' spiritual- and self-disciplines can quickly erode. In such a weakened state, there

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[82] Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 77.

[83] Bray, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 485-6.

is a propensity for clergy to spiritually harm those they are called to gently lead and spiritually feed.

The biblical qualifications to lead a church have been high and necessary from the very beginning. For centuries, many churches have required competence through extensive theological and pastoral education, usually in the form of a three to four-year Master of Divinity degree. As the mental health field has grown, character assessments through psychological exams, lengthy interviews, extensive background checks, and extended training and evaluation through Clinical Pastoral Education, and multiple-year residencies have been added to ordination requirements in most mainline denominations. It is little wonder that many aspiring clergy prefer the route of paying a small amount for an online certificate of ordination in a "church" with no such requirements. This sadly results in Boeing-like problems that jeopardize the safety and trust of pastors and churches in general, and Christ in particular.

Even with rigorous educational, psychological, and ethical standards being a requisite for pastoral leadership in many congregations, some clergy have successfully hidden deficiencies in their character and/or competency. Other times, the stresses of life and ministry erode spiritual and self-disciplines of well-intentioned but weak pastors. As compassion fatigue sets in and boundaries are weakened, there is a propensity to both harm and be harmed. Unaddressed, the negative effects ripple in space to the congregation and community and continue to spread through time.

Lingering congregational distrust often negatively affects clergy who follow a dysfunctional predecessor. As a result, both clergy and congregations often exhibit a sabotaging form of self-protection with disordered boundaries. This leads to

dissatisfaction and dysfunction in the church and for the “after-pastor(s)” attempting to lead and serve them. Not only do churches need healthy and accountable leaders, but the not-yet-believing world needs to trust the church leaders and congregation(s) before they can put their trust in Christ.

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul insisted that people whose metaphorical wheels fall off were to be disqualified from being pastors. It is time again to recommit to the kind of pastoral character and competency necessary for healthy church leadership and effective evangelism. The life and message of Christ is entirely trustworthy. God calls church leaders to live trustworthy and compassionate lives as agents of God’s healing and trust. This allows for the seed of trusting faith to be nurtured, grown, and become fruitful in the lives of God’s children.

Exploring the pastoral qualifications presented in Scripture will assist congregations in interpreting and applying timeless truths to help experience healing after a pastoral betrayal. In addition, congregations can become more effective at identifying, understanding, and establishing biblical boundaries to strengthen the necessary standards and relationship boundaries for clergy. As a result, there will be an increase in congregational morale and missional effectiveness, in addition to improving clergy's tenure, effectiveness, and spiritual vitality. This benefits pastors, parishes, and the overall population.

John Wesley, along with his brother Charles, is known for effectively and efficiently ordering a renewal movement that would become known as Methodism. John

could be compared as an eighteenth-century version of Titus on an even larger island, Britain. Though the Church of England was well-established, it had lost credibility through both complacency and corruption. England was on its way to becoming a pre-Christian “Crete”.

One hallmark of Wesleyan practice became known as the Covenant Renewal Service, often summarized as the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer. It was used by clergy and congregations alike to recommit to godly character and competence. With character and competency restored in clergy, we turn next to see how renewing congregational covenant prayer might also help to reestablish trust.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

It often only takes one negative example of a clergy betrayal to create a high degree of suspicion and even contempt toward other pastors and the churches they lead. How can we help reestablish trust in clergy if someone without pastoral character and competence harms a congregation? How have people moved from cynicism toward church leaders, Christian community and even faith in God? Are there any historical examples which have successfully moved people forward in their faith with honesty, assurance, and realistic hope?

One enduring example of a movement to re-establish faith and trust can be found in the Covenant Renewal Service. John Wesley drew on the theology of covenant and the tradition of the Puritans to adapt their personal devotional practice into a congregational opportunity to reaffirm their trust in God. For clergy and laity alike, it marked a transforming spiritual practice to collectively repent of their sin, submit to God's will and ways, and commit to reflecting Christ's character in every aspect of their lives. As Frank Baker summarizes,

> The genius of Wesley's service was that it preserved a method of personal covenanting for individuals and generations whose spiritual temperature was far lower than that of the Puritans, and at the same time fused this personal dedication

> into a congregational rite. The Methodist Covenant Service became a corporate renewal of individual discipleship.[1]

This historical foundation focuses on the origin, development, and influence of Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service and the resulting Wesleyan Covenant Prayer. It is a service and prayer with a long tradition of eliciting humility and renewal. Generations of people have prayed and renewed their covenant and trust in God. Through this, they often found healing from personal cynicism, blinded faith, and spiritual betrayal so that the covenantal community can be renewed. So be it now as then.

Pastoral Failure

The history of the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer cannot be understood without knowing the story of John Wesley's crisis of faith and pastoral character. In early 1736, he sailed from England to Savannah, Georgia, to be a pastor to the new settlers and a missionary to the American Indians. However, the zeal of his strict and rigid high church style of worship quickly caused a decrease in worship attendance. As an example,

> …in June 1736, Mr. Horton took issue with Wesley's pastoral style and complained that his sermons were "satires on particular persons" and that the people "can't tell what religion you are of. They never heard of such a religion before." Add to this Wesley's refusal to read the burial service over a dissenter and one can understand why many of the colonists were soon murmuring that their chaplain was really "a papist in disguise."[2]

To further complicate matters, John found himself attracted to one of his parishioners, a young eighteen-year-old woman named Sophia Hopkey. Sophia's parents had died in England, and she had come to live with her aunt and uncle in Georgia. Her

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[1] Frank Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 180 (July 1955): 215.

[2] Collins, Kenneth J. *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, Abingdon Press, 2003, 57.

uncle was known for financial impropriety, and eager to have her get married and out of his home. He made it nearly unbearable for Sophia to live there. John Wesley took special interest in giving her private tutoring in pastoral ministry and French. Though John wrestled with his prior vow to abstain from anything that might distract him from his ministry, the two developed a romantic relationship. Wesley recorded several times in his journals that though they were affectionate and kissed each other, there was nothing "untoward" in their physical connection.[3] That might be true, but self-reporting is not to be fully trusted as accurate and reliable. Even more concerning is the power differential in their relationship.

Sophia was sent to live in Frederica, Georgia, and John soon followed both to be in ministry to the settlers there and in closer contact with her. Several months later, they shared a private yet harrowing boat ride up the Atlantic coast and were stranded together on islands two different nights due to dangerous weather. At one point on the trip, John professed to her, "Miss Sophia, I should think myself happy if I were to spend my life with you."[4]

However, because Wesley struggled with whether he should be celibate or marry Sophia, he continued to give her mixed messages of his intentions over the next several months. John ended up casting lots on March 4, 1737, to make his decision whether to marry her, wait a year, or "think of it no more". After telling Sophia that the paper telling

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[3] Green, R. Edwin and Mary A. *The Sophia Hopkey Story: An Account of the Romance of the Rev. John Wesley in Georgia, 1736-1737.* St. Simon Island, Georgia; March 19, 1999, 3.

[4] Green. *The Sophia Hopkey Story,* 5.

him to "think of it [marriage] no more" was selected, she informed him that it didn't matter because she was getting married to someone else; Mr. William Williamson.[5]

Though Wesley had decided not to marry, he resented that Sophia was getting married to someone else so suddenly, and that another priest was marrying them. When newly married Sophia showed up for communion several months later on August 7, 1737, John humiliated her in worship and refused to serve her. This caused the congregation to protest Wesley's ministry, and he was brought up on a series of charges.[6]

John eventually realized his ministry to both the English settlers and hopes for establishing a mission to the American Indians were over. He left Georgia to sail back to England in December with his pride injured, faith shaken, and calling in question. As Kenneth Collins notes,

> Wesley was of two minds and two wills while in Georgia. His loves, in other words, were disordered, divided, often at odds with each other. Few can doubt, then, after reading the Georgia narratives, that Wesley was dissatisfied at the time, neither happy nor content with his own life and character.[7]

Rebuilding Faith

After several months of soul-searching, both John and Charles were revived in their faith through powerful encounters with God at Moravian prayer meetings based in Herrnhut, Germany, and gatherings on Aldersgate Street in London in May of 1738. As their hearts were "strangely warmed", tens of thousands of people throughout mid-eighteenth-century Britain, would become spiritually transformed along with John and Charles through methods and connections of plain-spoken preaching, practical theology,

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[5] Green. *The Sophia Hopkey Story*, 6.

[6] Green. *The Sophia Hopkey Story*, 8.

[7] Collins, Kenneth J. *John Wesley : A Theological Journey*, Abingdon Press, 2003, 62.

rich yet relevant hymns, and fellowship and accountability found in the structure of Methodist classes, societies, and bands.

John Wesley started utilizing different approaches to lead congregational acts of recommitting to whole-hearted faith in Christ and the "blameless" character that shows evidence of trusting in God. The earliest mention of a covenant-related theme in worship is described in Wesley's journal in 1747 when he offered an experimental form of a Covenant Service at the 4:00 a.m. Christmas morning worship service. His journal notes he "strongly urged the wholly giving up ourselves to God, and renewing in every part our covenant that the Lord should be our God."[8] He repeated the themes of this service based on the Covenant of Moses (Deuteronomy 29), the Covenant of Josiah (2 Kings 23), and the Covenant of Judah (2 Chronicles 15) in a series of sermons he preached the following February 1748, in Bristol and in July at Newcastle.[9]

Though the 1747 covenant service was unpublished, some of the likely content of his sermons can be gleaned from his *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*. Regarding 2 Chronicles 15:12, Wesley wrote, "Into a covenant. It would help to increase their sense of obligation, and to arm them against temptation. And by joining all together in this, they strengthened the hands of each other." He continued to interpret 2 Chronicles 15:15 as "Rejoiced at the oath – The times of renewing our covenant with

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[8] John Wesley, *The Complete Works of John Wesley, Volume 2 Journals 1745-1760*, The AGES Digital Library Collections (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), 94, http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-11/LIBRARY3/WES_WW02.PDF.

[9] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 215.

God, should be times of rejoicing. It is an honour and happiness to be in bonds with God. And the closer, the better."[10]

Not only was John Wesley an avid reader of Scripture and classic theological works, but he was also greatly influenced by a variety of his more contemporary theologians. Beginning in 1750, Wesley assembled and published a thirty-volume *Christian Library* of his favorites in what he subtitled "the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been publish'd in the English Tongue." Volume Eighteen featured the writings of Richard Alleine (1611-1681). This Puritan preacher deeply influenced John Wesley, who used his writings as the basis for the first official covenant renewal service. Wesley was also acquainted with the writings of Richard's son-in-law, Joseph Alleine, through his posthumous publication, *An Alarm to Unconverted Sinners*. This *Alarm* lovingly encouraged people to engage in a covenant with God similar to a marriage, "for better, for worse."[11] Richard Alleine had previously used the same metaphor in his *Vindicae Pietatis,* published in 1680. Wesley was also influenced by this wedding analogy and would repeat it in the context of the Covenant Renewal Service.

Vindicae Pietatis

The origins of what is now called the Wesleyan Covenant Service and Prayer began nearly a century earlier, with Richard Alleine and his aforementioned book with a verbose subtitle: *Vindicae Pietatis*: *A Vindication of Godliness, In the Greatest Strictness and Spirituality of it, From the Imputations of Folly and Fancy, Together with Several*

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[10] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 215.

[11] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 216.

Directions for the Attaining and Maintaining of a Godly Life. For those who know John Wesley's personality, we quickly see why he was so attracted to it. He was dedicated to developing leaders and preachers with godly character and a high degree of competence in their calling. For those who have experienced religious trauma, the "Imputations of Folly and Fancy" are often initial signs of spiritually abusive clergy.

The legacy of Richard Alleine's *Vindicae Pietatis* could be considered a miracle. In 1660, Archbishop Sheldon refused to allow the four-hundred-page volume to be licensed and published. In true non-conformist fashion, it was published without official authority, copies sold quickly, and a late nineteenth-century historian tells a fascinating story:

> [It] did much to mend this bad world. Roger Norton, the royal printer, caused a large portion of the first edition to be seized on the ground of its not being licensed, and to be sent to the royal kitchen [*to be burned in the cooking fires*]. But glancing over its pages he was arrested by what he read, and on second thoughts it seemed to him a sin that a book so holy and so saleable should be killed. He therefore bought back the sheets, says Calamy, for an old song, bound them, and sold them in his own shop. This in turn was complained of, and the shrewd publisher had to beg pardon on his knees at the council-table. The remaining copies were further sentenced to be 'bisked' or rubbed over with an inky brush, and sent back to the palace kitchen for lighting fires. Even in the palace there must have been worthy traitors, for 'bisked' copies occasionally turn up still.[12]

One cannot help but see the similarities between Alleine's book and John Wesley's defining childhood moment. *Vindicae Pietatis* was rescued from the fires of the castle kitchen and later used to transform souls and societies for centuries to come. As a six-year-old boy, John was miraculously rescued from their burning parsonage in

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[12] "Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900/Alleine, Richard," Wikisource, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography,_1885-1900/Alleine,_Richard.

Epworth.[13] Wesley's mother, Susanna, called him "a brand plucked from the fire". Like the book, John Wesley was used to light souls on fire across ages and borders.

It could be said that *Vindicae Pietatis* was rescued a second time, nearly a century after it was first printed and rescued from the fires of the castle kitchen. About forty-six years after John Wesley was saved from his burning home, he saved *Vindicae Pietatis* from obscurity and adapted its texts for the first Covenant Renewal Service on Monday, August 11, 1755. His journal details:

> At six in the evening, we met for that purpose at the French Church in Spitalfields. After I had recited the tenor of the covenant proposed, in the words of that blessed man, Richard Alleine, all the people stood up in testimony of assent, to the number of about eighteen hundred persons. Such a night I scarce ever saw before. Surely the fruit of it shall remain forever.[14]

Development of the Covenant Renewal Service

The Covenant Renewal Service evolved in several ways over the next quarter century. The first service in 1755 in Spitalfields, London, was preceded by several days of explanatory preparation. Wesley kept that preparatory practice in subsequent services two months later in Bristol and Dublin on Good Friday, 1756. He had simplified the preparation period by 1758, where he notes a single day of "solemn fasting and prayer" preceded three services at 5 am, noon, and night.[15] By 1760, the preparatory period was held earlier on the same day of the Covenant Renewal Service, as noted in his journal on Friday, February 29, 1760: "A great number of us waited upon God, at five, at nine, and

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[13] "The Epworth Rectory on Fire and the Rescue of John Wesley, Aged 6," The Museum of Methodism and John Wesley's House, https://www.wesleysheritage.org.uk/object/the-epworth-rectory-on-fire-and-the-rescue-of-john-wesley-aged-6/, accessed September 27, 2024.

[14] Wesley, *The Works*, 23.

[15] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 216.

at one, with fasting and prayer; and at six in the evening we met in the church in Spitalfields to renew our covenant with God."[16]

Despite John Wesley's usual preference for exactness in his words and plans, there was no strict script for the Covenant Renewal Service. He typically opened it with a hymn and a prayer, read Richard Alleine's five "Directions" to explain the purpose and process of covenanting with God, invited people to stand, raise their hands, or both to signify their acceptance of the covenant, and closed with a prayer, communion, and singing a hymn. In 1762, John's brother, Charles Wesley, wrote the hymn "Come, Let Us Use the Grace Divine" based on Jeremiah 1:5: "Come and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten." It became known as "The Covenant Hymn" and has been associated with and often sung at Covenant Renewal Services ever since.[17]

Though Wesley was intentional about not creating the illusion that the Covenant Renewal Service was sacramental, the services usually, if not always, ended with Holy Communion. Likely drawing on his pastoral formation at Oxford with the 1680 anonymously authored "Country Parson's Advice"[18] as his guide, Wesley felt that the covenant was "sealed at the Lord's Table."[19] Therefore, one of the early logistical challenges of the Covenant Renewal Service was finding a consecrated church large

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[16] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 217.

[17] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 217.

[18] *The Country-Parson's Advice to His Parishioners* (London, UK: Ship in St. Paul's Churchyard for Benj. Tooke, 1680).

[19] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 218.

enough to hold all communicants. For this reason, Wesley chose the much larger Huguenot Spitalfields church over the Methodist Foundry and the West Street Chapel.[20]

Covenant Services were held at any time of the year. However, in London, they were eventually established by 1762 to be held on the First of January and each successive year at Spitalfields until the yet larger City Road Chapel was built and opened in 1778. Though City Road Chapel was not considered formally consecrated as a place to receive the sacraments, Wesley's insistence on this had softened over the years.[21] The large new Methodist headquarters provided an opportunity to establish a permanent date to observe a Covenant Renewal Service, and in 1782, it was settled to be the first Sunday evening in each new year.[22] Changing it to the consistency of a Sunday also made it possible to move from a 5-9 pm service, with the added difficulties of traveling in the dark winter, to beginning earlier at 3 pm to make it safer and more convenient for people. This remained the standard date and time for over a century in London and beyond.[23]

Despite the Covenant Service's widespread use and transforming effects, there were no printed materials other than selections chosen from Richard Alleine's *Vindicae Pietatis* printed more than a century before. In 1779, one of Wesley's senior preachers, Thomas Lee, took the initiative to publish a "penny pamphlet" to highlight Alleine's *Directions* chapter. This upset Wesley, who understandably insisted on reviewing and approving any materials bearing a Methodist moniker. Fortunately, it also spurred Wesley to write and publish an official pamphlet in 1780 called *Directions for Renewing*

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[20] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 218.

[21] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 219.

[22] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 219.

[23] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 219.

our Covenant with God, which would be reprinted several times as the service grew and spread through time and geography.

Wesley considered his *Directions* more of a guide than a formal Order of Service. The *Directions* were never accepted or included in the corpus of Wesley's Methodist theology and worship standards, such as his revision of the Book of Common Prayer and Articles of Religion.[24] Despite the lack of formal establishment, the service was practiced with similar form and fruit for nearly two centuries until the British Book of Offices revised it in 1936. The changes reflected a society that considered the long-standing Covenant Service "strong meat."[25]

Richard Alleine likely intended *Vindicae Pietatis* solely as a devotional reading and guide for individual prayer. In contrast, John Wesley moved it from the privacy of a prayer closet to the collective healing and commitment of the church community, including church leaders. Wesley brought it past a personal covenantal practice and even beyond the re-commitment of a particular parish and place to God. Inviting dozens of societies (groups of 20-30 people who met weekly for worship and faith formation) to come together in exceptionally large gatherings for these special Covenant Renewal Services was a truly "connexional" event. "The genius of Wesley's service was that it preserved a method of personal covenanting for individuals…and at the same time fused this personal dedication into a congregational rite."[26]

Wesley's closing paragraph advised people to make this covenant "not only in heart, but in word; not only in word, but in writing" as a will, deed, and memorial of the

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[24] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 219.

[25] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 219.

[26] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 215.

covenant to strengthen in times of doubts and temptations.[27] He frequently noted the powerful effects of conviction and comfort from these covenant services in his journals. His appreciation of their spiritual effectiveness can increase our interest in revitalizing congregational covenant renewal today.

> At five in the evening about twelve hundred of the society met me at Spitalfields. I expected two to help me, but none came. I held out till between seven and eight. I was then scarce able to walk or speak, but I looked up and received strength. At half-hour after nine God broke in mightily upon the congregation…. And when I returned home between ten and eleven I was no more tired than at ten in the morning. (Easter Monday, 1757)[28]
>
> This is always a refreshing season, at which some prisoners are set at liberty. (1766)
>
> Many found an uncommon blessing therein. I am sure I did, for one. (1784)
>
> Many mourned before God, and many were comforted. (IV.158)
>
> Many were filled with peace and joy, many with holy fear, and several backsliders were healed. (V.43)
>
> It was a solemn season, wherein many found His power present to heal, and were enabled to urge their way with strength renewed. (VI.135)
>
> Several received either a sense of the pardoning love of God or power to love Him with all their heart. (VI.320) [29]

Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service could be summarized into three parts: Preparation, Practice, and Prayer. Though all three aspects are threaded throughout the service, there is a clear order of focus based on the necessary upward spiral of spiritual development. First, there needs to be instruction, or catechesis, about the nature of God

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[27] John Wesley, *Directions for Renewing our Covenant with God*, 2nd edition (London, UK: Printed by J. Paramore, 1781), 23.

[28] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 218.

[29] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 218.

and how we are called to live a committed relationship of faith in Christ. Wesley included five subtitles to what we can call the *Preparation* section: 1) Three Principles, 2) Make Your Choice, 3) Embark with Christ, 4) Resign and Deliver Up Yourselves to God in Christ, 5) Confirm and Complete all this by Solemn Covenant. It is worth noting that the fourth part of the *Preparation* section contains most of what we call the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer.

> I will be no longer mine own, but give up myself to thy will in all things.[30]
> I put myself wholly into thy hands: put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt; put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for thee, or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee, or trodden under foot for thee; let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing, I freely, and heartily resign all to thy pleasure and disposal.[31]

Next, Wesley has five more "Directions for Living the Covenant" which could be called the *Practice* section: 1) Set aside time before the Lord to seek conviction, grace, and repentance, 2) Compose your spirits to understand the high importance of the Covenant, 3) Lay hold of the God's grace and strength to enable you to keep your promise, 4) Resolve to be faithful with hearts, mouths, and hands given to God, 5) Set aside time to pray with bodily and spiritual surrender.

The last section is focused on *Prayer*. Wesley included five pages of universally appropriate yet personally challenging prayers. They offer an opportunity for people to pray them collectively before they routinely pray them individually to tend the flames of their personal covenant with God. It is in this section that Wesley repeated the marriage metaphor used by both Richard and Joseph Alleine: "I do here with all my power accept thee, and take thee for my Head and Husband, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer,

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[30] Wesley, *Directions for Renewing our Covenant with God*, 13.

[31] Wesley, Directions for Renewing our Covenant with God, 14.

for all times and conditions, to love, honour and obey thee before all others, and this to the death."[32]

The Covenant Renewal Service, likely intended to be an annual prayer service, is briefly summarized through what is now called the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer. This prayer is nearly verbatim from Alleine's work, just as the Renewal Service used Alleine's Directions and many other large sections of *Vindicae Pietatis* as the liturgy for the service. Parkes notes, "The Covenant Prayer is a highly truncated version of the original, but both the spirit and content of its essential obligations remain."[33]:

Consider these lines John Wesley read from Alleine's *Vindiciae Pietatis,* now commonly attributed to be Wesley's Covenant Prayer*:*

> I will be no longer mine own but give my self up to thy will in all things…[34]
> Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt,
> Put me to doing, put me to suffering,
> Let me be imployed [sic] for thee, or laid aside for thee,
> Exalted for thee, or trodden under foot for thee,
> Let me be full, let me be empty,
> Let me have all things, let me have nothing,
> I freely and heartily resign all to thy pleasure and disposal….[35]
> O dreadful Jehovah, the Lord God omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
> Thou art now become my Covenant friend, and I through thine infinite Grace,
> am become thy Covenant-servant, Amen, So be it:
> And the Covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in Heaven."[36]

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[32] Wesley, Directions for Renewing our Covenant with God, 21.

[33] William Parkes, "Watchnight, Covenant Service, and the Love-Feast in Early British Methodism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Fall 1997, 58.

[34] Richard Alleine, (1611-1681), *Vindiciæ Pietatis: or, a vindication of godliness, in the greatest strictness and spirituality of it. From the imputations of folly and fancy Together with several directions for the attaining and maintaining of a godly life* (London, UK, printed in 1665. Ann Arbor, MI: Text Creation Partnership, 2011), 198.

[35] Alleine, *Vindiciæ Pietatis*, 199.

[36] Alleine, *Vindiciæ Pietatis*, 208.

Note how similar Wesley's Covenant Prayer is below, to the previously quoted lines by Richard Alleine:

> I am no longer my own but yours.
> Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.
> Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
> Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
> exalted for you, or brought low for you.
> Let me be full, let me be empty.
> Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
> I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.
> And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
> And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen. [37]

Challenges

For those affected by a clergy betrayal, the benefits of applying an adapted Covenant Renewal Service will not likely be sufficient to restore a healthier trust. Limitations are found on multiple levels. First are the limits of appeal: it is unlikely to reach those who are no longer or never involved in Christian community due to a hurtful personal experience or cultural cynicism. To learn how to rebuild trust in the vast numbers of people who are unchurched or de-churched due to spiritual abuse, either directly or indirectly, it may help to study a historical spiritual movement that was able to attract and transform those who were cynical toward the church.

The second challenge of using the Wesleyan Covenant Service as a model for rebuilding trust in clergy is the historic exclusivity of who was invited to participate in the Wesleyan Covenant Service. Similar to the Love Feast, the Covenant Service was open only to those who were considered "in good standing". Given the spiritual

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[37] *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 607.

alienation often caused by spiritual abuse, those who manage to stay associated with a church often become wary peripheral observers. Though our modern day understanding of "good standing" is much more lenient than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the Methodist movement, it is likely that participation rates would be low by those who most need their trust rebuilt.

A third issue is in defining and learning to apply what it means to "put your whole trust in God", and vicariously, the pastor and church that represents God, after a previous pastoral betrayal. Recent research by Dr. Jamil Zaki affirms that cynicism is common but harmful. However, the goal should not be to move toward optimism, which believes that all is or will be well (and trustworthy). Rather, Zaki encourages a move toward skepticism, which believes that there *could* be a reason to trust, if there is consistent evidence. Zaki suggests honest skepticism is the foundation of evidence-based trust, because skepticism is grounded in reality. Conversely, simplistic optimism results in a blind trust, which often leads to disappointing results and ongoing betrayals.[38]

The Christian community has often seen skepticism and trust as being on opposite sides of a spectrum. However, it bears further study and practice to more clearly define both and recognize them together as an important foundation of faith. This approach hearkens back to the wisdom of Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), whose philosophy and theology rested on "faith seeking understanding." Perhaps a renewed application of the Covenant Renewal Service and Prayer could emphasize a healthy covenant of faithful skepticism.

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[38] Jamil Zaki, *Hope for Cynics: The Surprising Science of Human Goodness* (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2024).

Aspects of the Wesleyan Covenant service and prayer that emphasize openness to inviting and recognizing God working in our lives are likely more helpful in rebuilding realistic trust and hope. It would also be helpful to clarify how the contrasts offered throughout the Covenant Prayer are not between cynicism and optimism. Rather, genuine (skeptical) hope and trust can be found wherever, with whomever, and whatever we find God doing (or even not doing) in our lives.

In addition to the caveats and limitations of using the Wesleyan Covenant service and prayer as an approach to rebuilding trust, it is likely necessary for those who have been personally betrayed by a pastor to have several months, if not years, of therapy with a licensed professional counselor (LPC) trained in helping people recover from the trauma of spiritual abuse. Religious trauma often leads to cynicism, which leads to poor physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual health. Other times, it can lead to denial, which can be just as dangerous as it increases the vulnerability for ongoing or future spiritual abuse. It often takes a professional counselor to help a person recover from spiritual abuse from falling off the path of realistic trust and into the ditches of cynicism or blind faith on either side.

Though it does not happen as often as one would hope, there is also the possibility that abusive church leaders will recognize, repent, and work to repair the harm they have done. Evidence suggests the possibility of the transforming role the Covenant Renewal played in John's repentance of his spiritual abuse in Georgia. Engaging in the Wesleyan Covenant Service and prayer are insufficient means to accomplish this work. It is necessary for specifically trained and experienced therapists to help spiritually abusive

clergy learn to recognize and heal from the source of what caused their deep shame and insecurity, which led to their abusive behavior.

Conclusion

The Covenant Renewal Service began about a decade after John Wesley recognized his pastoral failure. He sought a practice for all – himself included – to rebuild a trusting relationship with God within Christian community. The service was planted, watered, and grown through prayer. Wesley's Covenant Prayer is a synthesis of the overall service of praying to renew a congregation's covenant with God. Gregory Clapper summarizes,

> As a prayer, it expresses our basic posture in life: looking to God not only with humility and reverence, but also with the eager desire to respond to God's grace, which flows from our gratitude over being loved and forgiven. In the words themselves, we see the bold commitment that Christ has called forth by purchasing us on the cross, a commitment to use our freedom to lead a life of humble love. Finally, this prayer is scriptural, it is emblematic of Wesley's theology;[39]

Randy Maddox summarized the purpose of the Covenant Renewal Service as having three goals: "(1) Recurrent recognition and confession of our failures to live responsibly within our restored relationship to God, (2) an affirmation of God's faithfulness and forgiveness, and (3) the renewal of our commitment, based on God's gracious empowering."[40] This historic service has been adjusted many times to a changing world and has the potential to continue a tradition of transforming and healing souls and societies. Moreover, there are ways to adapt the historical foundation of

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[39] Gregory S. Clapper, *As If the Heart Mattered: A Wesleyan Spirituality* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1997), 106.

[40] Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 211.

Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service and Prayer to address the problems created by clergy who have betrayed their congregations.

Maddox's summary of the three goals of the Wesleyan Covenant Service can be adapted to help restore healthy trust after pastoral betrayal. First, a congregation is prepared by being educated about the contrast between pride and humility and the act of surrendering one's will to God's will. As clergy and congregations learn to recognize and demonstrate healthy and godly servant leadership in themselves and others, they will better be able to confess ways they have been deceived, betrayed, and/or harmed others.

The second goal is to help people understand that even when their Christian leaders have been unfaithful and betrayed their pastoral charge, they can still affirm that God is faithful and will help them discern trustworthy spiritual leaders. Related to this is effective teaching about healthy forgiveness and wise, skeptical trust. Finally, after fully preparing people by addressing some common problems and misconceptions that often lead to their vulnerability to spiritual abuse, they can be offered an opportunity to begin the process of healing from the pain through the renewal of trust and commitment to God and working toward a healthier life of faith, both individually and congregationally.

The Wesleyan Covenant Service and Prayer is characterized by a posture of humility and can be used to help expose, correct, and prevent spiritual abuse. It could be utilized as part of an antidote and preventative spiritual prescription against soul sickness caused by religious trauma. An appropriate adaptation of the Wesleyan Covenant Renewal Service could be used to help bring closure to the process of helping a church recover from spiritual abuse.

Based on this historical foundation, the Covenant Renewal Service and the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer can be adapted for use by congregations who have been betrayed by clergy they trusted, as well as by repentant clergy who are convicted that they have trusted their own will and ways rather than God's. This takes preparation, practice, and prayer – the same three elements of a Covenant Renewal Service - that can be adapted to each unique circumstance.

The following variation of Wesley's Covenant Prayer is offered as an example and close to this chapter. It leads to an exploration in the next chapter of how to understand and apply forgiveness towards those who have broken their covenant and spiritually harmed those they were entrusted to strengthen and protect.

Wesleyan Covenant Prayer

Adapted for Congregational Healing by Rebecca Borke

I am no longer my own or anyone else's, but yours.
Put me to no more and no less than what you will,
Place me with those whom I need to humbly learn and heal.
Put me to doing and succeeding; put me to struggling and discerning.
Let me be put to work on your behalf; set me aside while you work on me.
If I am recognized for you, may I be kept humbled for you.
Let me be full of grace and healing; let me be emptied of shame and pride.
Let me have and be all things necessary to do your will,
let me have or do nothing that would hinder your will.
I freely and fully surrender all I am and have to your glory and service.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
I covenant to a journey of wise trust in you and your Church. So be it.
And this covenant made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Forgiveness is an area of theology that is deeply personal for many people. When people are hurt and betrayed by someone they had trusted, the issues of forgiveness often test the application of faith to life. Is forgiveness a decision or a feeling? How does one know if they can or should forgive? Unlike the more philosophically oriented areas of theology, forgiveness is both a theological discipline and a spiritual practice that most people are forced to wrestle with in life.

Some may question whether forgiveness is even a theological field of study. The theology of forgiveness is inextricably connected to theologies of Christology, ecclesiology, and atonement. Our understanding of forgiveness is often shaped by which aspects of Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection are emphasized. For many, the cross of Christ is the central image of God's forgiveness of humankind, both individually and collectively. The basis of humans being able to forgive is rooted in God's forgiveness of our sins. As the only One who is complete and perfect, without past, present, or future need of human forgiveness, God is the Primordial Forgiver. On this side of eternity, our forgiveness will always be partial, a shadow of God's perfect and complete forgiveness.

Theologian Miroslav Volf addresses the practical challenge of forgiveness when a person's life and sense of faith have been shattered. Antecedent to the goal of helping a wounded person forgive, he writes, "Before anything else, she needs Christ to cradle her, to nurse her with the milk of divine love, to hold her in his arms like an inestimable gem, to sing her songs of gentle care and firm protection, and to restore her to herself as a beloved and treasured being."[1] This sense of divine love, protection, and compassion is a necessary foundation for wounded people to walk a path toward forgiveness that goes beyond their damaged abilities to release themselves into God's care. It is understandable for abused people to need time and assurance of safety before they can assess how, when, and perhaps even whether human forgiveness is to be extended.

Forgiveness has wildly different interpretations and innately tricky applications. There are legal, therapeutic, and theological approaches to forgiveness. A legal understanding of forgiveness focuses on granting relief from a debt that is owed, such as student loan forgiveness or bankruptcy. Therapy emphasizes the emotional aspects of forgiveness, specifically releasing negative thoughts of resentment and retribution toward an offender. Our theological understanding of forgiveness may not be as biblically straight-forward as we assume. The Bible insists that God alone can ultimately forgive - "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"[2] yet also seems to demand that individuals forgive others if they want to be forgiven by God—"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive

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[1] Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*: *Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 206.

[2] Mark 2:7b.

others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."[3]. Passages such as this have theologically troubled many people, both personally and pastorally.

How do we understand and apply forgiveness in the context of someone entrusted as a spiritual leader who has betrayed that trust? Not only are people directly harmed by an abusive pastor facing the challenge of forgiveness, but associated congregations and communities also wrestle collectively with the theology and practice of forgiveness, particularly toward someone they had previously trusted as their theological teacher and spiritual leader. Which theological understandings of forgiveness need to be clarified and corrected to help people abused by their pastors? We examine standard definitions and common assumptions about forgiveness to better understand these difficult questions.

Rethinking Forgiveness

Many people, including pastors, have twisted the understanding of forgiveness. It is likely that most have simply perpetuated common misunderstandings based on linguistic and cultural convenience. But there have also been spiritually abusive pastors who have distorted the theology of forgiveness to protect and benefit themselves. They may have insisted that they should be unconditionally pardoned, forgiven, reconciled, and allowed to keep the position and power they feel entitled to. For this and many other reasons, it is time to rethink forgiveness.

It does not help that there are some otherwise well-regarded theological dictionaries with disconcerting definitions of forgiveness. For instance, the Anchor-Yale Bible Dictionary says, "Forgiveness is the wiping out of an offense from memory; it can

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[3] Matthew 6:14-15.

be affected only by the one affronted. Once eradicated, the offense no longer conditions the relationship between the offender and the one affronted, and harmony is restored between the two."[4] This suggests forgetfulness and reconciliation as expected outcomes of forgiveness, and we will soon learn why that is neither helpful nor true. The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms defines forgiveness as "Pardoning or remitting an offense. It restores a good relationship with God, others, or the self after sin or alienation."[5] This dangerously assumes forgiveness restores the relationship not only with God but with the offender. The *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* envisions forgiveness as more esoteric than realistic, describing it as "a dynamic, social-psychological experience of being released from the deleterious effects of guilt and sinful behavior and restoring broken relations between human beings and God and among themselves."[6] To summarize those and other typical definitions, we will examine six questionable theological beliefs about forgiveness that warrant deeper analysis and correction:

1. To forgive is to forget and never bring it up again.
2. To forgive someone means pardoning or overlooking their behavior.
3. If I forgive someone, they will not face consequences for the harm they caused.
4. The evidence of forgiveness is reconciliation.

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[4] John S. Kselman, James H. Charlesworth, and Gary S. Shogren, "Forgiveness," *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary: D–G*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 831-8, http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780300261882-627.

[5] Donald K. McKim, The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, Second Edition: Revised and Expanded (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 107.

[6] Joel B. Green, Jeannine K Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* 2nd ed. IVP Bible Dictionary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 695.

5. If I want God to forgive me, I must forgive people who hurt me.
6. If I forgive someone who hurt me, I will no longer feel the pain of that harm.

Though there could be a kernel of truth in each of these understandings about forgiveness, these assumptions are emotionally, physically, spiritually, and theologically dangerous. Misconceptions about forgiveness can knot up people's souls. Therefore, we will gently examine and attempt to untangle the unhelpful assumptions described in the list above.

The first statement, "to forgive is to forget and never bring it up again" is based on passages such as "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more,"[7] "I alone am the one who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins,"[8] and "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."[9] These scriptural examples describe God's acts of mercy and forgiveness. They do not infer a divine expectation of human forgiveness and "forgetting." How could we revise our understanding of forgiveness as forgetting and/or condoning? Dr. Jessica Shultz sagely advises, "Forgiveness must also be set apart from forgetting. Whereas forgetting eliminates the experience from memory, forgiveness focuses on reframing one's responses to an offense rather than eliminating the experience of the offense from consciousness."[10]

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[7] Jeremiah 31:34.

[8] Isaiah 43:25.

[9] Hebrews 8:12.

[10] Jessica M. Schultz, Does Forgiveness Matter? A Study of Spiritual Transformation among Survivors of Significant Interpersonal Offenses (PhD dissertation, University of Iowa, 2011), 28. DOI: 10.17077/etd.mm3ayya7.

In John 8, the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus in front of a crowd. They tested Jesus to see if he would advocate for stoning her as the law dictated or if Jesus would overlook her sin. He turned it around and told the crowd, "let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!"[11]. They each remembered ways they had sinned as they laid down their stones and left. "Then Jesus stood up again and asked the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" "No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."[12] The others realized they could not condemn her as they recalled how they had each sinned and had been divinely, if not also humanly, forgiven. Jesus asked them to remember their own sin in order to be able to forgive the sin of another.

When we assume that "forgetting" sin erases our memory of it, or at least a commitment never to speak of it again, it could temporarily ease the painful memories of when, how, and who wounded another. However, it is questionable whether that is a wise way to address sin, whether our own or another's. Hebrews 8:12 quotes God saying, "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."[13] The Greek word translated as 'remember' is *mimnesko,* which implies an active, purposeful recall.[14] It describes a perseverating memory, a rumination that widens and deepens the initial damage caused by sin. God does not expect or want us to forget how we have sinned, or others have sinned against us, but desires that we are released from our

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[11] John 8:7, NRSV.

[12] John 8:10-11, NRSV.

[13] Hebrews 8:12, NRSV.

[14] "Hebrews 8-12 Greek Text Analysis," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/text/hebrews/8-12.htm.

ruminations through forgiveness. Forgiveness is not forgetfulness but choosing to reframe our responses instead of ruminating.

Just as forgiveness does not mean forgetting, it also does not mean overlooking sin. Jesus, the only sinless one, could have condemned the woman caught in adultery but chose to demonstrate forgiveness with boundaries. Yes, he released her from the condemnation of her sin with the word "Go…," but he also continued, "…and sin no more."[15] The woman (and, by implication, all of humanity) was not set free so that she could continue in sinning against God and others. Jesus was not overlooking, excusing, or condoning her (or any of our) offenses. Likewise, humans should not ignore, compare, or justify our sins or others. Forgiveness does not excuse or condone sin but is conditional and insists on positive change.

The third theological truth is that forgiveness does not truncate justice and is not free of consequences. This confronts the veracity of the third statement, "If I forgive someone, then they will not face consequences for the harm they caused." There is a conflict that seems to arise between attempting to forgive and seeking justice. Do we need to let go of a need for justice to forgive? Not at all! Hasty forgiveness and complicit silence often ends up colluding with harm, rather than speaking out against evil and injustice. This results in further harm, both for the one who was initially hurt as well as for others who might be harmed in the future if the abuser and abuse is not stopped.[16] Forgiveness does not give people a pass but insists on justice and accountability.

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[15] John 8:11, NRSV.

[16] Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (Leiden: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 172.

A fourth way of rethinking forgiveness is that it does not necessarily lead to restoring or reconciling a damaged relationship. This truth counters the common belief that reconciliation is evidence of forgiveness. In situations where a person has been harmed by someone they do not know; how could a non-existent relationship be reconciled? Is it always or ever possible to turn back the clock to "before harm" and avoid the natural and relational consequences? Dr. Daniel Treier says, "Restored relationships— even with God— may not undo the consequences of our actions. God— and even human victims— may forgive a sin such as drunk driving while the perpetrator rightly lands in prison…. [F]orms of reconciliation depend on repentance.."[17]

In something called *unilateral forgiveness*, a wrongdoer has not repented but the victim has nevertheless forgiven. Assuming the abuser is still alive, despite not being troubled or convicted about the harm they caused, there cannot be an appropriate path of reconciliation. Forgiveness should not include reconciliation when the wrongdoer does not consistently demonstrate genuine repentance. However, the one who was harmed and extended forgiveness (with appropriate distance) can experience renewal in their relationship with God. [18]

The fifth concern about forgiveness is regarding the victim's responsibilities in forgiving, whether there are conditions placed on the abuser, and whether God's forgiveness of us is predicated on our forgiveness of others. Jesus' warning in his Sermon on the Mount is easily misunderstood: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your

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[17] Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Evangelical Theology* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 171-173.

[18] Bash, Forgiveness and Christian Ethics, 172.

Father forgive your trespasses."[19] These two verses follow immediately after Jesus taught the crowds how to pray what we now call the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is a primer on establishing a relationship with God that leads to a better way of relating to one another.

On the surface it seems to say that God will not forgive us unless we forgive those who have hurt us, but there are other theologically accurate ways of looking at it. Martin Luther emphasized that "interpersonal forgiveness is not a requirement but evidence of divine forgiveness." Likewise, John Calvin interpreted forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer as "an assurance of forgiveness more than a command."[20] Long before both Luther and Calvin, Cyril of Alexandria did not see the Lord's Prayer model of forgiveness as *quid pro quo* but as meaning, "Forgive us in the same way we do when we forgive."[21] Perhaps interpersonal forgiveness is not so much a command, but evidence of the effects of divine forgiveness. It is an assurance that we are forgiven in the same way that we forgive others.

A final issue to address is the claim if we have forgiven someone, that we will no longer feel the pain of the harm. Forgiveness is not based on human feelings. Though forgiving may ease some of the pain of the harm someone caused, the wounds can cause emotional, spiritual, and physical repercussions. Painful memories and feelings are often felt in varying intensities and times, even (and especially) throughout the long journey of intentional forgiveness. As Brad Fipps asserts, "While we begin the process of forgiveness by consciously forgiving the wrongdoer, the hurt, pain, and suffering we

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[19] Matthew 6:14-15, NRSV.

[20] Maria Mayo, The Limits of Forgiveness: Case Studies in the Distortion of a Biblical Ideal (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 116.

[21] Mayo, Limits of Forgiveness, 117.

have experienced may continue to be felt [and certainly remembered].[22] Forgiving is not based on our feelings. The journey of forgiveness is similar to grief, with waves of turbulent emotions complicated by time and subsequent decisions.

Our challenge in understanding and practicing forgiveness originates in an imperfect recognition and acceptance of God's mercy and forgiveness in our lives. Any echo of God's forgiveness will be distorted where our broken humanity is present. Miroslav Volf eloquently summarizes, "Our forgiving is faulty; God's is faultless…We forgive tenuously and tentatively; God forgives unhesitatingly and definitively."[23] This reality is not to be used as an excuse not to forgive but as an inspiration to appreciate how we have been forgiven more deeply so that we can forgive others with truth, justice, and accountability.

Releasing Forgiveness

People hurt by a pastor have unique and complicated challenges regarding forgiveness. They are often left disoriented from the reality of both the nature of the abuse and what forgiveness means. Because forgiveness is frequently twisted and misrepresented, it is necessary to rethink forgiveness in a more biblically accurate way. The focus now shifts to understanding forgiveness as a spiritual release from the pain of abuse and related pressures weighing down souls and burdening congregations.

Primarily, the burden to forgive needs to be lifted, reimagined, and released. People who have been hurt are often told it is their "Christian duty" to forgive someone

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[22] Brad Fipps, *Global Wesleyan Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology* (Kansas City, MO: The Foundry Publishing, 2020), 107.

[23] Volf, *Free of Charge*, 220.

who harmed them, even if there are little or no signs of repentance on the part of the abuser. Sometimes, people are presented with a false dichotomy of choosing forgiveness and reconciliation or anger and resentment. Are those the only choices? When pastors and people misinterpret the nature of forgiveness, it creates a type of pressure to forgive in false ways that is an additional form of spiritual abuse. Their desire to use forgiveness as the magic pill to fix the problem only masks it. It signals that the pastor's desires and inadequacies are prioritized over the well-being of those harmed. When people are told that forgiveness and reconciliation are required for their spiritual healing and well-being, it often sets them up for further abuse that is cloaked in religious language. An example is when pastors advise victims of domestic violence to "forgive" and reconcile with someone who is still (and often will always be) a threat. Releasing the pressure to forgive restores the free will to choose whether and how to forgive.

Forgiveness must be approached with sensitivity toward those who have been harmed. Mayo warns, "suggesting that victims are morally obligated to forgive and portraying nonforgiving victims as vengeful and hate-filled serves only to amplify the offense they already suffer."[24] Likewise, such one-sided expectations of forgiveness create "a constant pressure to forgive…[which] marginalize[s] victims who are unable or unwilling to forgive those who tortured them, terrorized them, and murdered their loved ones."[25] Mayo continues, "While I would argue that victims may not be obligated to forgive when certain conditions are not met, the question remains: Must the victim

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[24] Mayo, Limits of Forgiveness, 93.

[25] Mayo, Limits of Forgiveness, 107.

forgive when the offender has satisfied every requirement?"[26] A compassionate pastoral approach to this question would wisely allow abundant time and safe space to allow people to discern the answer to that question in their particular case.

Though forgiveness as an ideal is well-intentioned, Mayo explains three problematic areas. First, biblical forgiveness is unnecessarily equated with one-sided, unconditional forgiveness. Second, the requirement for repentance is lost. Third, forgiveness is defined as a psychological and emotional feat accomplished by the victim, regardless of whether the offender is present or shows remorse. How can we release these problematic approaches to forgiveness? By learning how forgiveness is literally "release"!

Jesus' parable in Matthew 18:21-35 reveals a helpful understanding of "releasing" in the context of forgiveness. When the king was settling accounts with his servant managers, one was found to owe ten thousand talents, worth about $35 billion in today's money. Initially, the king ordered that the servant, his wife, and children be sold, along with all their possessions. Any funds raised and returned to the king would have been minuscule compared to the debt owed. The servant pleaded with the king, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."[27] Consider the math – even if the servant manager earned the equivalent of $100,000 a year and turned over 100% of his paycheck to pay off his debt, it would take 350,000 years to pay back 35 billion dollars, not

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[26] Mayo, Limits of Forgiveness, 79.

[27] Matthew 18:26, NRSV.

including interest. That does not require a patient king but a forgiving king. "Out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt."[28]

Examining the Greek words translated as "released" and "forgave" illuminates our understanding and application of forgiveness. It is sometimes imagined that the servant in the parable was held captive by the king as he begged for mercy, but that is not depicted in the story. The original word for "release" is *apolýō* in Greek, a combination of *apo* (away from) and *lyo* (to loosen, release).[29] It means letting go, releasing, discharging, divorcing, or dismissing. It implies an annulment of an existing bond, which is the same word Matthew used in the next chapter (19), where Jesus taught about divorce ("releasing" the spouse). The man in Jesus' parable who failed at his job was being "released" or, in our vocabulary, getting fired. Sometimes, "releasing" someone means putting a safe distance between you and them, whether physically, emotionally, financially, or any combination. This is not usually how people picture grace or forgiveness, but our theological imagination needs to be expanded. In this parable, forgiveness is demonstrated first by "releasing" (firing) the servant and then by canceling the financial debt.

We often assume that such releasing is the opposite of forgiving. However, the Greek word Jesus used to "forgive" the debt is *aphiemi*, from the words *apo* ("away from") and *hiemi* ("send"), which is synonymous with *apolyo*. *Aphiemi* has several meanings: to send away, let go, cancel, leave, discharge, remit, and forgive.[30] This

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[28] Matthew 18:27, NRSV.

[29] "Strong's Greek: 630," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/630.htm.

[30] Verlyn Verbrugge, ed, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Abridged Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2003), 80.

warrants a re-examination of many assumptions regarding forgiveness and how to forgive. Perhaps giving and receiving forgiveness between humans could be more accurately described as extending and receiving grace with the wisdom of healthy boundaries and accountability.

Forgiving someone does not mean a person must trust or be reconciled with someone who harmed them, even if there are indications of repentance. It is usually wise to forgive at a safe distance, especially in the early years. People often need to protect themselves and others in their care by avoiding toxic situations and distancing the people who cause them. Forgiving sometimes means that people release their expectations for others to be able to make it right with them.

One frequently overlooked characteristic of forgiveness is that it is primarily intended for the benefit of the forgiver, regardless of the initiation or response of the forgiven. A person cannot receive true forgiveness without repentance - a contrite turning of attitudes and behaviors from that which has harmed toward that which demonstrates trustworthiness. Think of Christ on the cross as a guide for forgiving someone. Jesus's plea from the cross, "Father, forgive them,"[31] exemplified how Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of all who crucified him, including religious and political leaders and everyday people who preferred to release the notorious Barabbas. He does not directly forgive them but turns the matter over to God.[32] Jesus did not tell the crowd, "I forgive you! You don't know what you're doing."[33] Maria Mayo adds,

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[31] Luke 23:34a NRSV.

[32] Mayo, The Limits of Forgiveness, 6.

[33] Mayo, The Limits of Forgiveness, 170.

> Jesus does not say, 'Father, forgive them because they are insecure and self-centered,' or 'Father, forgive them so I will not be locked into victimhood.' In such readings, the prayer of Jesus is transformed into an act of unconditional forgiveness to fit current models of offense as psychologically understandable and forgiveness as the key therapeutic response.[34]

Jesus could have unilaterally forgiven the crowd that made false accusations and cheered his death. Instead, he chose to turn the business of forgiveness over to his Father. This example shows how we, like Christ, can turn the heavy lifting of forgiveness over to God. When the pain is too intense, or the person who hurt us is still a threat, we can take a biblical step of faith to release them into God's hands of justice and grace and pray, "Father, forgive them."

The story of how Jesus handled forgiveness does not end there. Five verses later, there is a shift from working out forgiveness toward those who crucified him to the two other men crucified alongside him. The unrepentant criminal "kept deriding him, saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'"[35] The other criminal expressed remorse for his sin and recognition of Christ's innocence: "But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he added, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."[36] Both the repentant and unrepentant sinners faced the earthly consequences of their transgressions, but Christ only gave the repentant sinner the promise of eternal salvation and implied forgiveness.

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[34] Mayo, The Limits of Forgiveness, 184.

[35] Luke 23:39.

[36] Luke 23:40-43.

Accountable Forgiveness

Victims of spiritual abuse are often expected to respond with forgiveness to an apology from their pastoral abuser. Perhaps the abusive person has been convicted, humbled, and seeks to make amends. Dr. Wade Mullen, author of *Something's Not Right*, outlines five guidelines to determine whether an apology is genuine or deceptive, whether they are a pastor, family member, or stranger. Using the anacronym "SCORE," a victim of spiritual or any other kind of abuse can use this as a helpful tool to aid in discerning if and how to forgive and possibly begin the long path of reconciliation.[37]

> S – Surrender. Is the abuser (and those complicit in the abuse) laying down their defensiveness? Are they willing to walk away from any further denials and deflections? Are they willing to be specific rather than vague in who they are apologizing to and for what reasons?[38]
>
> C—Confession. Are they accurately naming the wrong(s) done? Are they confessing to both known abuse and that which they managed to keep hidden? A truly repentant person often makes confessions for as much or more as others are aware of. This usually requires the willingness to submit to further investigation so that the confession is not short-changed and unfulfilled.[39]

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[37] Wade Mullen, Somethings Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from Its Power (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 143.

[38] Mullen, Something's Not Right, 143-4.

[39] Mullen, Something's Not Right, 144-146.

O – Ownership. Rather than accepting a passive apology that avoids unflattering exposure, look for an apology that takes full responsibility for the harm done and is willing to accept any consequences for that harm.[40]

R- Recognition. Not only do the wrongs need to be identified by the abuser, but the specific ways those wrongs harmed someone also need to be recognized and articulated. The scope of abuse and the guilt of the abuser is laid bare. [41]

E – Empathy. When facing the ugly reality of how their abuse has harmed someone, a truly repentant person will carry an empathic burden. In their brokenness, they will desire to work at offering restitution and restoring trust.[42]

The process of rebuilding trust is characterized by many phases, often jumbled and complicated by a need to frequently re-align one's spiritual compass after it had been demagnetized through religious trauma. Misguided assumptions about forgiveness only continue to prevent or erode trust. Misusing forgiveness lays a heavy burden on victims of abuse. Instead of assuming that direct forgiveness is the ultimate response to wrongdoing, pity and prayer that turn people and the pain they cause over to God may be more appropriate.[43] As a church, we can release the pressure to forgive in misguided ways.[44] The truth must be fully revealed, the abuser must honestly repent, and accountability must be evident before direct forgiveness should be explored as an option.

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[40] Mullen, Something's Not Right, 146.

[41] Mullen, Something's Not Right, 147.

[42] Mullen, Something's Not Right, 147.

[43] Mayo, The Limits of Forgiveness, 174.

[44] Mayo, The Limits of Forgiveness, 164.

Miroslav Volf identifies two primary actions that describe forgiveness being enacted. The first is to "name the wrongdoing and to condemn it."[45] The second half of forgiveness is to "release them from the burden of their wrongdoing."[46] Though Volf is to be commended for his commitment to identifying and condemning the harm that was done, the second part of releasing the one who harmed from the "burden of their wrongdoing" deserves further scrutiny. Is justice to be suppressed? Are amends to be optional? Is accountability to be ignored? A distinction between the temporal and eternal burden of wrongdoing can and should be made. God's forgiveness leads to the hope of eternal salvation, but neither divine nor human forgiveness necessarily releases the weight of consequences in this world.

Forgiveness allows a person to be free from the wounds of sin others have inflicted on them. Forgiving sometimes, but not necessarily always, means that people let go of their expectations for others to be able to make it right with them. When a person forgives someone, the forgiven are still held accountable by God and society for their actions. Rather than contributing to a cycle of debt and revenge, forgiveness can create a new movement of accountable community and responsible grace.

Conclusion

Forgiveness is an immensely personal and theological challenge for people spiritually harmed by a pastor. Not only is there an understandable distrust toward the pastor who wounded them, but also an extension of that suspicion toward other clergy,

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[45] Volf, *Free of Charge*, 129.

[46] Volf, *Free of Charge*, 130.

congregations, and Christians. To complicate matters, much of what is taught about forgiveness in churches and society is theologically weak. The person harmed often feels stripped of the ability to be safe or seek justice when they have a distorted understanding of forgiveness. This often leads to an unwillingness to consider a path of forgiveness. Alternatively, some people struggle to forgive based on striving to act and feel in the same distorted ways that forgiveness is often falsely presented. Both scenarios result in a spiritual infection being allowed to fester, individually and ecclesiologically.

A theological interpretation of forgiveness must be rediscovered, accepted, and applied. Forgiveness originates and is only perfected in the Trinity, with a secondary work among humans as a bilateral and conditional process. When human forgiveness recognizes not only the past harm but also the present reality and future implications of releasing an abusive person from the earthly and social consequences of their actions, safer and healthier relationships are possible.

For people to forgive an abusive pastor in a spiritually healthy way, the pastor and/or church and denominational officials who placed and kept the abusive leader in power need to repent in word and deed. In addition to fully and accurately naming the evil of the abuse, actionable commitments to prevent future harm and amends must be made to each known victim. This is necessary for bilateral forgiveness.

Healthy forgiveness between humans, including pastor-parishioner relationships, is also conditional. Just as a lasting peace is conditioned on justice, healthy forgiveness is also predicated on justice. Unfortunately, there are many situations where an abusive pastor has not consistently shown repentant actions, done their part to restore an ability to redevelop trust in them, or perhaps has died and cannot do either. In those cases, there are

no biblical examples warranting forgiveness. Instead, compassionate clergy and churches can be trained to gently and patiently walk with those who have been abused as they demonstrate Christ-like character and competency needed to re-establish trust in other more credible clergy.

Ideally, the challenge of forgiving abusive clergy would not be an issue. However, there will always be abusive and deceitful people who take on the role of a pastor and harm people in their parish. What are signs of abusive tendencies in pastors and churches that would help us identify "bad apples" before they can harm a congregation? It is easy to be blinded by their charm and deceived by their persuasiveness. The next chapter will explore the Interdisciplinary Foundation of Impression Management. As a powerful tool for both good and evil, it is essential for clergy and congregations to learn how to recognize and resist its dark tactics and how take the necessary risks to be transparent and empathetic instead.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Presentation matters. From nonverbal signs like fashion and décor to spoken, written, and online words and images, everyone spends time and money building and maintaining an image. What is posted on social media or written in Christmas letters tells a story to the world about identity and priorities. Sadly, some people think that value is proportional to the number of "likes", "followers", and "hits."

It is not only individuals who work to convey a positive image, but organizations do so as well. Whether corporations with well-funded marketing departments or churches with limited resources trying to be good ambassadors of Christ, the goal is to have people like and trust them. Similar to society in general, pastors and churches often see their value in proportion to the size of their worship attendance, budget, and staff.

The modern term "branding" is used by marketers to describe the keywords and images utilized to increase visibility and reputation in the world. The field called *Impression Management* studies how both individuals and organizations present themselves to the world. This social science began with a 1956 sociology textbook called "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" by Dr. Erving Goffman. In his seminal book, Goffman compared Impression Management to a theatrical production and the relationship between an actor and an audience. A good actor is believable to the audience.

Even when an actor accidentally slips out of character, sociologists find that the audience will naturally use tact and other "embarrassment reduction techniques" to help more acceptable social conventions continue.[1]

The goal of Impression Management is all about increasing rewards and minimizing consequences. Properly used, it can be a helpful and effective tool. Usually, Impression Management aims to increase trust by making positive impressions like intelligence, hard work, honesty, and fairness. Occasionally, people want to make a negative impression, called "strategic incompetence." For example, saying, "I am bad at taking notes" or "I can never load the dishwasher well" are tactics of Impression Management used to get out of paying attention and working.

Impression Management is inherently powerful and can be destructive when used by people in unethical ways. When facts are distorted, inconvenient truths are swept under the rug, or victims are blamed, the dark side of Impression Management is at work. Like learning how to safely use power tools, it is important to understand how Impression Management should be used carefully and ethically to build a community of grace and truth. In the hands of an untrained, insecure, or power-hungry person or organization, Impression Management can cause great harm to individuals, society, and specific to this study, churches.

Impression Management in Congregations and Clergy

Telling inspiring stories of how people's lives are being transformed can lead to greater unity, generosity, and commitment to Christ. There are many examples of ethical

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[1] Terry A. Sheridan, *Managerial Fraud: Executive Impression Management, Beyond Red Flags* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 67-68.

ways of making a positive impression that churches use to broaden and deepen their effectiveness in reaching and leading people to trust in Jesus. Volumes of resources and scores of seminars are available to help church leaders learn how to improve their congregation's ability to offer Christ's compassion, wisdom, and healing to a broken and hurting world that needs Good News. Most of these resources using Impression Management are ethical and frequently fruitful.

Pastors work hard to ensure their most talented and generous volunteers and donors are committed to the vision and mission of the church. Motivating others to serve sacrificially is much easier if they highly regard their pastor and church culture. If they do not, they could become upset, expose problematic issues, and leave with their time and treasure. When challenges arise, pastors tend to focus primarily on positive or powerful self-presentation to rescue their image and regain power over others.

In a church setting, the rewards and consequences gained from managing people's impressions are almost always measured by attendance and giving. A third dynamic is morale, which is more difficult to measure yet undeniably important. These three pressures are a serious responsibility for clergy to navigate with integrity. When the desire to maintain or increase attendance, giving, and morale is greater than the character and competence of church leadership, it sets the stage for a tragedy of biblical proportions.

Due to the "soundbite" nature of how most people get their information and impressions today, details often need to be omitted for privacy and brevity. This is not an inherent sign that the smiles and glowing testimonials on the posts, videos, or from the pulpit are "fake." However, the reality is sometimes more disappointing or disturbing

than we want to admit. Reality and integrity become compromised in an attempt to protect and manage people's impressions of pastors and churches.

Rev. Dr. Wade Mullen describes how the dark side of Impression Management enables spiritual abuse.[2] To maintain an admirable appearance, pastors and churches attempt to hide whatever may decrease rewards or increase consequences. Out of self- or church-preservation, some church leaders fail to disclose unflattering but relevant details. Soon, the focus becomes managing an image rather than addressing the needs and concerns of those who the church or pastor has betrayed. Impression Management becomes perverted and used in response to adverse events to deceive, manipulate, and hold secrets that perpetuate harm. This continues to spiral as a "clan culture mentality" is reinforced and close relational ties are guarded like spiritual hostages.

Impression Management could be compared to fire in a church. Fire is essential for heat, cooking, and energy, and is an ancient metaphor for the power of the Holy Spirit. However, it also has the potential for devasting destruction if used without restraint or left unattended. Churches and leaders must be trained and watchful to ensure that clergy, congregations, and other church-related systems do not engage in dangerous Impression Management tactics. Otherwise, we will continue to see victims burned and the credibility and witness of the Church reduced to an ash heap.

Before the sociological term "Impression Management" was invented, the prophet Zechariah had enough of people claiming to shepherd God's sheep but only using them as a prop to increase their power and privilege. Writing about 520 years before Jesus was born, Zechariah was sickened by some shepherds entrusted to guard the sheep at the

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[2] Wade Mullen, "Impression Management Strategies Used by Evangelical Organizations in the Wake of an Image-Threatening Event," Dissertation, Capital Seminary and Graduate School, 2018.

Temple, which had been donated and dedicated as an offering to God. Instead, these so-called shepherds sold the sheep and pocketed the money. Zechariah described the brokenness of the entire system and how it was an analogy for leaders who profit off vulnerable people. Eugene Peterson transliterates these verses in a relevant way: "The people who buy them will butcher them for quick and easy money. What's worse, they'll get away with it. The people who sell them will say, 'Lucky me! God's on my side; I've got it made!' They have shepherds who couldn't care less about them."[3] After some performative prophetic acts, Zechariah heard God describe "a shepherd indifferent to victims, who ignores the lost, abandons the injured, and disdains decent citizens. He'll only be in it for what he can get out of it, using and abusing any and all…"[4]

Related to this image of a pastor as a shepherd, the passage from 2 Peter 2 is an echo with a description of 'wolves in sheep's clothing' who prey on the ones they are entrusted to protect. This is a hallmark sign of spiritual abuse. Often subtle and easily overlooked, this dynamic happens when a pastor and church leaders use their influence, authority, and insight to increase their power and control over a situation or person. They misuse their call to serve and abuse their spiritual authority by using it for their benefit rather than to serve those they are called to gently nurture and fiercely protect.[5] They use the dark side of Impression Management to pose like shepherds, but they function more like parasites.

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[3] Zechariah 11:5, MSG

[4] Zechariah 11:16, MSG

[5] Dave Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen, The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing & Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1991), 175.

One problem is that spiritually abusive pastors have often convinced themselves that they are being faithful and doing God's will. Spiritual pride can easily blind clergy from ways they may be using or abusing others in the name of faith. This has a disorienting effect on parishioners, who might react in several ways. Some people become unwittingly loyal to the façade of charisma and confidence exuded by a pastor who becomes conflated with God's omnipotence and omniscience. Devotion and support of their pastor become cult-like, and the afflicting infection becomes systemic.

As people begin to recognize that something might be wrong, conflict often grows. Church staff and active volunteers often become confused and acutely wounded by a pastor's unreasonable expectations, rapid vacillations, gaslighting, and other forms of abuse. Other people may not have as much proximity, but they may sense that something about the pastor is not right and cannot be fully trusted. As a result, they disengage from church life and even trust in God.

The deception wielded through the dark side of Impression Management is connected to our human ability to use denial as a way of avoiding emotional suffering. Denial can be a temporary gift when there is too much pain to bear and function through the demands of life. However, denial can quickly turn into delusion, in which people can no longer discern between what is true or false. In addition to spiritually abusive pastors being in denial about the harm they cause, victims of spiritual abuse often become trapped by a delusion that their pastor could not be in error. If something does not seem right, they blame themselves or someone else, even other victims or innocent bystanders.[6]

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[6] Johnson and Van Vonderen, The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse, 180.

In addition to denials, frequently used defensive tactics identified through Impression Management include excuses, justifications, and comparisons.[7] For instance, they may distort scriptures into twisted theology to excuse or justify a person's pain. Many people have heard clergy give so-called pastoral advice such as, "You are depressed because of your hidden sin," "Your marriage is suffering because you aren't submitting to your husband's authority," or "If you pray like I tell you, then you won't have so many problems." These dark tactics of Impression Management can be summarized in two ways: to feed the grandiose and insecure pride of church leaders, and to protect themselves from the consequences of feeding their pride.

To add insult to injury, others in the church or denominational leadership will sometimes blindly defend and protect the abusive pastor. They might deny any "red flags" that should have stopped the process of the pastor's path to leadership. There may be an excuse of ignorance despite an unwillingness of due diligence. Even when an abusive dynamic can no longer be denied or excused, other tactics focus on shaping the public's perception of the wrong. For instance, statements like "she shouldn't dress that way" or "they have not been innocent" shift the responsibility for the abuse from the abuser to the victim.

Another tactic is using comparisons to demonstrate why this accusation should be dismissed. Statements such as "There are bigger problems, and we should not waste our time with petty grievances," "It was just locker room talk," and "It was a misinterpretation of the pastor's warmth and affection" are all examples used to minimize

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[7] Wade Mullen, Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from Its Power (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 103.

the allegation of abuse when held in contrast with other issues, cultures, and systems. Noticing such comparisons helps identify and confront hidden yet harmful abuse.

Because Impression Management is used both on individual and institutional levels, the term "abuser" could be a person, organization, or both. To apply this to a congregational setting where an abusive pastor may have left but the wounded remain scattered and sore, the leaders of the congregation and/or denomination must step forth to offer a genuine apology for how they failed to keep people spiritually safe from a "wolf in sheep's clothing." Unfortunately, church leaders have too often responded with demonstrations rather than true contrition. Examples include incomplete or insincere concessions followed by reassurances that the issues are behind them and the troubles are resolved. This is evident when they show more concern about the public appearance and approval of the church's image than the well-being and care of those harmed. Such a pastor and/or congregational leaders are "holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them!"[8]

Impression Management and Spiritual Abuse

As previously explained, Impression Management is not inherently evil or intrinsically good. All people and organizations, including clergy and churches, use impression management techniques, usually without knowing its terminology and tactics. It is important not to compare or conflate Impression Management with spiritual abuse, which is always sinful and harmful. However, some darker Impression Management techniques will inevitably be used alongside spiritual abuse. The choice is whether

[8] 2 Timothy 3:5 NRSV.

church leaders will have the character to humbly admit and repent for the harm caused by one of their own. After a pastoral betrayal has been revealed, are they willing to risk their reputation for the short-term as they utilize honest and ethical Impression Management practices? Do they fully submit to the authorities, put the needs of the harmed first, and implement policies and practices to prevent similar harm in the future? Or will they react with the "dark arts" of Impression Management: denials, diversions, and deceptions, which exacerbate the harm of spiritual abuse?

Having personally experienced and counseled hundreds of people who have been spiritually abused, Wade Mullen explains six ways Impression Management enables spiritual abuse. They include 1) attempting to hide evil actions to maintain an admirable appearance, 2) failing to disclose relevant details out of self-preservation, 3) focusing on managing their image rather than addressing the needs and concerns of the victims, 4) prioritizing organizational image management in ways that are destructive to individuals, rather than redemptive, 5) using deception in response to adverse events which allows more deceit, manipulation, and secrecy, and 6) reinforcing a "clan culture mentality" to prevent ungodly realities from being exposed.[9]

Some victims of spiritual manipulation are eventually able to recognize the many layers of how they were abused. However, the dark side of Impression Management often impacts them yet again, as they live with the fear that it is better to silence their experience and suppress their feelings in order to maintain a favorable impression of themselves rather than appear as one who was deceived. If church leaders have compassion along with good character and competence and are willing to risk immediate

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[9] Mullen, "Impression Management Strategies," 2-3.

rewards for the long-term good of God's people as they emulate a humble approach to Impression Management, they can empower victims of spiritual abuse to process their pain and rediscover a renewed faith.

Understanding the nefarious tactics of Impression Management used by both abusive clergy and unhealthy church systems can lead to better support for those who have been spiritually abused. Congregations and denominations can be equipped to recognize problematic personality traits and consistently expect excellent character and integrity in their leaders. Most importantly, those who are or have been victimized will have more significant opportunities to be heard, believed, and given freedom in their journey toward healing from religious trauma.

To overcome the harmful effects of Impression Management, a church, and pastors must demonstrate the opposite spirit and actions of the tactics that contributed to spiritual abuse. Instead of looking away from or ignoring abuse, manipulation, and deception and calling it "forgiveness," a church needs to fully protect the physical, emotional, and spiritual safety of victims of abuse. Silence is tacit approval of harm done, and healthy clergy and church leaders must find their voice to help identify what caused the pain and start to heal the wounded. Naming and confronting abuse empowers victims and helps prevent others from becoming victims.

One helpful example is from a very large church in Minnesota. All seemed wonderful until the youth pastor was charged with five counts of sexual abuse. The painful situation was complicated because the youth pastor was also the son of the senior pastor. Many leaders would have reacted by using the dark tactics of Impression Management to hide or spin the harm done. Instead, that senior pastor wisely chose to

prioritize the most vulnerable – his son's victims and their families – over any sense of duty and protection he would have for his son. Rather than distorting reality to preserve the church he had built and led, he humbly stepped away from his position. He openly and fully welcomed police investigation and an outside ministry group called GRACE, an anachronym for "Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment".[10]

Over a year was spent digging into and responding to the depths of the youth pastor's harmful actions. They looked throughout the life of the church and other clergy to ensure that there were no other situations where abuse could occur. The leaders were transparent and contrite, a decision they knew would cause them to lose many members. This did lead to a drastic reduction in staff and programs, but the church proved its love for those who were harmed and its integrity in the process. Though this congregation is now much smaller in numbers, it is also much healthier and safer. It is a model of how church leaders can and should embrace the risks and resist the dark tactics of Impression Management. This is evidence that pastors and congregations can learn how to harness the power of Impression Management ethically and honestly while safely protecting individuals, especially the most vulnerable.

Impression Management and Titus 1:6-9

The overarching descriptor of a trustworthy pastor in Titus is "blameless". This word in Greek means "not convictable when a person is properly scrutinized."[11] Paul explains that beyond the legal requirements, there are also moral indicators that should

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[10] GRACE: Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment, https://www.netgrace.org/.

[11] "Strong's Greek: 410," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/410.htm.

disqualify potential church leaders. They include arrogance, a quick temper, addiction, violence, and greed. The original Greek words have the added connotations of self-interested hedonists, prone to anger, resentment, prejudice, bitterness, contention, and brawling.

Impression Management tactics are often used as a cloak to hide the red flags described above. Arrogance is misinterpreted as confident leadership; anger is seen as righteous indignation; addictions are hidden; consequences are denied; and violence (often verbal) is interpreted as passion. When such distorting tactics are exposed, those who have been hurt by spiritual abuse can begin the process of healing and rebuilding trust.

It can take years to recover from spiritual deception and abuse that was allowed to continue due to the negligent use of Impression Management. Part of the recovery process includes learning who and how to trust again. Titus 1:8 lists six positive character traits that indicate a greater likelihood of a trustworthy pastor. They include hospitality, a lover of goodness, self-controlled, upright, devout, and restrained. The Greek nuances of each of these English words further clarify the image of trustworthiness. For instance, hospitality is the call to love and warmly welcome people, especially those who are different and more vulnerable. This contrasts with a spiritually abusive pastor who might shun being with people who do not help elevate their desired status. A “lover of goodness” describes loving that which is morally and spiritually good. This contrasts with the near-synonym *kalos*, which focuses more on external, skin-deep beauty, often emphasized in Impression Management.

The Greek definition of self-control in this text describes someone who is self-aware, temperate, and balanced. This is the opposite of a controlling, spiritually abusive pastor. Using negative tactics of Impression Management, along with that of any sycophants in the church who aid and abet their abuse of power, they operate with an imbalanced sense of justice and care and reactional extremes. This is often rooted in a lack of self-awareness and willingness to serve humbly without recognition. Such is the problem of a focus on managing impressions to elevate the power and status of the pastor (and their ministry) at the expense of those being crushed by the spiritual abuse.

Impression Management and the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer

Methodism began as a renewal movement in the Church of England, starting with a Holy Club formed by brothers John and Charles Wesley at Oxford University. John Wesley struggled with multiple personal and ministry failures during a long and disastrous missionary journey to Savannah, Georgia. His strict and demanding style of church leadership and a problematic romantic relationship with young Sophia Hopkey could both be described as spiritually abusive. This left the churches he served with a very negative impression of him, and they charged him with several offenses. Aware that he was unable to repair his reputation in Georgia, John returned to England and spent several years trying to learn from and overcome his disordered character and lack of competence.

Wesley had always been dedicated to high standards of Christian belief and behavior for himself and others in his spiritual care, but this created a struggle for him to know how to inspire others without coming on too forcefully. John would eventually

develop systems and methods for effective discipleship and spiritual growth. This was dependent on developing leaders and preachers with godly character and a high degree of competence in their calling with necessary accountability to prevent the problems he had caused in Georgia.

He sought relief and guidance from God through the writings, fellowship, and prayers of Moravians and Puritans. At some point in his post-Georgia processing period, he read a book describing the "Imputations of Folly and Fancy" that are often initial signs of misguided priests like he had been. Such "folly and fancy" are characteristic of the dark tactics of Impression Management needed as a masquerade for the ugliness of clergy abusing their spiritual power.

The Wesleyan Covenant Prayer is characterized by a posture of humility needed to ensure Impression Management is used ethically. It is both an antidote and preventative spiritual prescription against the sickness of spiritual abuse. For victims trying to recover their ability to trust God, themselves, and other clergy, this prayer has the potential to overcome the evil of abuse with the good of knowing and trusting God's loving kindness. This helps to restore healthy trust after spiritual abuse through a prayerful example of humility and surrender to God. In addition, this practice of covenant prayer affirms that God is faithful and trustworthy, even when there has been or currently is difficulty determining when, who, and how to trust other pastors. As this prayer works through minds and rests gently in souls, there can be a renewal of commitment to God and trust in pastors and churches who demonstrate similar humility and faith.

Impression Management and Forgiveness

Victims of spiritual abuse have unique and complicated challenges regarding forgiveness. First, they have endured the added assault of Impression Management tactics, which have often disoriented them from the reality of both the nature of the abuse and the meaning of forgiveness. Because forgiveness is often misrepresented and twisted around the tactics of Impression Management, victims must be educated about forgiveness in a more biblically and theologically accurate way. Maria Mayo's study of forgiveness releases victims from common but unhelpful pressures associated with forgiveness.

In the early church, asking for forgiveness was marked by "silence, sorrow, tears of mourning, and fasting."[12] The necessity of not only apologetic words but actions of repentance were necessary requisites for forgiveness. This was a big contrast to "the traditional Greco-Roman idea of *sungnōmē,* which depended…on one's ability to excuse one's act or shift blame."[13] These actions of excusing, justifying, and shifting blame are the same dark tactics of Impression Management.

The two Greek words often translated as *forgive* or *forgiveness* in the New Testament are *aphiemi* and *charizomai*. Our modern Western church culture has often interpreted these words to characterize forgiveness as a merciful gift toward someone who has harmed or stolen from us. Church leaders that perpetuate this unnuanced and oversimplistic definition are mismanaging a false impression. The word *aphiemi* is used most frequently - 147 times in the New Testament. 133 of those references are in the Gospels and spoken either by or about Jesus and his actions. *Aphiemi* is used only

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[12] Daniel R. Driver, "Forgiveness," In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

[13] Driver, "Forgiveness."

fourteen other times in the rest of the New Testament.[14] As explored through multiple examples in the Theological Foundation chapter, *aphiemi* means to let go, send away, and even divorce. It does not usually convey a warm, concillatory, or graceful tone, despite the impression that Christians usually associate when it is translated as *forgive*.

The other word for forgive, *charizomai,* is only used 23 times in the New Testament. It has the more characteristic definition that we often associate with forgiveness: "to grant as a favor, i.e. gratuitously, in kindness, pardon or rescue: deliver, (frankly) forgive, (freely) give, grant."[15] Interestingly, it is only used three times in the Gospels, all in Luke 7 (verses 21, 42, 43).

Instead of assuming that forgiveness is the penultimate response to wrongdoing, perhaps pity and prayer are more appropriate.[16] Mayo suggests that rather than prioritizing victims of abuse to forgive, church leaders should focus on requiring "repentance from the offender (Luke 17:3-4) and accountability from the community (Matt. 18:15-20)."[17] Even if and when these conditions are met, Jesus still empowers his followers with agency to decide what to forgive (John 20:23).[18]

To overcome the harmful effects of misused Impression Management, an organization must demonstrate the opposite spirit and actions of the tactics that contributed to spiritual abuse. Instead of looking away from or ignoring abuse,

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[14] "Strong's #863: aphiemi," BibleTools, Greek/Hebrew Definitions, https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Lexicon.show/ID/G863/aphiemi.htm.

[15] "Strong's #5483: chaizomai," BibleTools, Greek/Hebrew Definitions, https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Lexicon.show/ID/G5483/charizomai.htm.

[16] Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness,* 174.

[17] Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness,* 188.

[18] Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness,* 189.

manipulation, and deception and falsely calling it “forgiveness,” a church needs to fully prioritize the physical, emotional, and spiritual safety of victims of abuse. Silence is tacit approval of harm done, and clergy and congregations must find their voice to help identify and stop the wounds from bleeding. Confronting abuse (and abusers) empowers victims and helps prevent others from becoming victims.

Conclusion

The Church must understand the power of Impression Management and implement the skills to use it ethically and fruitfully. It must also learn to recognize the signs when church leaders and systems are using Impression Management in ways that cause, deny, or hide spiritual harm. Spiritual abuse is a toxin that affects not only the individuals who have been infected but the entire Body of Christ. We need the Great Physician, along with pastors and doctors of the Church, to rebuild ethical principles, policies, and practices for Impression Management at all levels. This will also help to rebuild trust and add extra levels of protection to prevent people with abusive tendencies from gaining power or positions in church leadership.

It is inherently difficult for victims of spiritual abuse to recognize the scope, confront the abuser, and find justice and healing by themselves. Their challenges are compounded, and a sense of betrayal is deepened, when the dark tactics of Impression Management are also used by broader church leadership, members, and denominational leaders. These tactics include denials, excuses, justifications, and comparisons.

Understanding the power of Impression Management can help us use it ethically and fruitfully. Conversely, it also helps us recognize signs when church leaders and

systems are using Impression Management in ways that cause, deny, or hide spiritual harm. Rather than allowing the truth to be spun, we reclaim the truth that may be initially difficult. When church leaders and “after-pastors” honestly admit and consistently exhibit signs of representative repentance, it allows for an increased ability for people to rebuild trust after spiritual abuse is addressed with honesty and integrity by the church.

Though not all motivations or acts of Impression Management are unethical, there are frequently used practices that are spiritually, theologically, and pastorally irresponsible and harmful. Understanding the nefarious tactics of Impression Management used by both abusive clergy and unhealthy church systems can lead to better support of those who have been spiritually abused. By teaching how Impression Management works to pastors and congregations, people who have been spiritually harmed will have more significant opportunities to be heard, believed, and given agency in their spiritual healing journey. They will become more aware of and resistant to potentially church leaders in the future. This strength will also allow for an increased ability to grow in their faith and trust the spiritual leadership of clergy with healthy boundaries.

This might feel like a heavy burden to place on already struggling clergy, churches, and denominations. A current clergy shortage puts pressure on congregations and ordaining bodies to be more accepting of pastors' faults and flaws, both benign and toxic. People may quip, “God does not call the qualified, but qualifies the called.” As we navigate this road to rebuild trust, there is a great temptation to choose the fastest route or avoid the costly tolls.

There are no quick and easy ways of rebuilding trust. But as a starting point, a set of resources for pastors and congregations has been developed to provide options and examples for people to begin learning and growing in trust. The following chapter summarizes an initial case study of how one pastor learned and responded to the tools designed to help rebuild trust in congregations like his. Compassionate spiritual care and focus, led by pastors with character and competence, will likely grow and develop the fruit of deep trust and faith.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

During doctoral training, a cohort colleague, Rev. Dr. John McGill, taught that trust is built or lost in three key areas: integrity, competency, and benevolence. When people live out their beliefs, especially in self-sacrificial ways for the greater good, they have integrity, which garners trust. However, when their words and actions do not align, it is often the first reason that people lose trust in them. When someone is competent, we can better trust that they know what they are doing. When someone demonstrates incompetence, trust levels decrease. The third component of trust is based on benevolence. Whether or not they show genuine care about the well-being of others is an indication of the extent to which they can be trusted. The maxim "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" helps explain the interplay between competency and benevolence.

Dr. McGill stated that everyone is unique in how and to what extent they place value in each of these three aspects of trust. In addition, his studies showed about half of people extend trust until there is a reason not to, and the other 50% trust only when given a reason to. People have different thresholds for what they believe warrants needed levels

in each category. They are not based on objective, measurable amounts but on our values and emotions.[1]

When it comes to rebuilding trust in congregations where a previous pastor has lacked integrity (primarily referred to as *character* in this study), competency, or benevolence (described as *compassion* in this study), there are inherent challenges in being able to increase trust. Each congregation is comprised of dozens or hundreds of individuals who have each been affected differently and have unique needs and reactions that must be addressed in various ways. By focusing on four foundations as potential sources of learning how to rebuild trust in churches, several options are available for people's different perspectives and needs. Some may not find any of the tools developed from these foundations to be helpful, either because they do not address the root causes of their distrust or because it is not the right timing or environment to begin the process of increasing trust.

My context, First Wausau United Methodist Church, had experienced pastoral betrayal in the past. However, I was hesitant to have them become direct participants in this study. It would be difficult to get objective data since my role as both their pastor and an investigative researcher would introduce a dual relationship. In addition, after over four years of diligent work rebuilding trust, the people of First Wausau and I now enjoy strong and healthy relationships. If that subjective assessment of current trust levels is inaccurate, that would also make it more difficult to both gather accurate data.

Therefore, I decided to develop a six-week sermon series to teach my congregation the four foundations I had learned throughout my research. I would ask for

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[1] John McGill, "Emotional Intelligence for Clergy," WebEx meeting, Mid-semester Intensive Floodgates Cohort Class, October 15, 2024

their suggestions for improvement and implementing those changes. The focus of the actual research project would be on other congregations where the study could be more objective.

The first week was an overview of spiritual abuse, the second week focused on the Interdisciplinary Foundation of Impression Management, and the third week was an exploration of Titus 1:5-9, the Biblical Foundation. The fourth and fifth weeks delved into the Theological Foundation of Forgiveness, with a two-part focus of "Rethinking Forgiveness" and "Releasing Forgiveness." The sixth Sunday ended the series with a time of congregational recommitment through the Historical Foundation of the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer. These tools will be described more fully in the Project Implementation section.

With the help of a Jon Goertz, graphic designer at First Wausau who created visual images for the series, and the work of the Worship Design team that carefully selected hymns to support each weekly theme, these "tools" were presented at Sunday morning worship services over the summer. Many people responded each week with appreciation for learning about spiritual abuse and feeling empowered to notice and better address it in the future. Others felt strengthened by a more nuanced understanding of forgiveness. However, the most common reaction was how they recognized spiritual abuse as parallel to politicians and judges who misuse their power and have betrayed the trust of the people they were elected to represent and serve. Several people said the series deepened their resolve to insist on speaking and voting against politicians and other leaders who do not demonstrate trustworthy character and competence. For instance, I happened to preach the Biblical Foundation on Titus 1:5-9 the day before the Supreme

Court ruled in favor of broad Presidential immunity. That week, I received several calls and emails from people in my church who said they wished the Supreme Court had listened to my sermon on the necessity of character and competency before issuing their ruling.

The official project, however, was intended to learn from congregations outside of my own. I knew of colleagues who followed a spiritually abusive predecessor and were still struggling to bring healing and recover the trust of their congregation. I hypothesized that if a few of them could participate in a case study about spiritual abuse and could be equipped with the materials I developed to help my church, then these resources could be adapted to help their parishioners begin recovering from previous abusive pastors.

Methodology

In June of 2024, I shared a general invitation to clergy to participate in my study through three primary channels. The first was a public post on my Facebook page, which reached several hundred clergy colleagues. Many of them responded with interest but either did not currently serve a church with known pastoral betrayal, or their schedules did not allow them to participate in the study. The second invitation was through an advertisement in the weekly e-news of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. This list reached thousands of clergy members but did not lead to any response. A final invitation was a personal email I sent to about a dozen clergy colleagues in the Wausau area. Each of these invitations, through Facebook, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, and my emails, said:

Dear Clergy Colleagues,

I am conducting a research project for my Doctor of Ministry and am looking for several pastors to participate in my study. If you are experiencing the challenge of gaining the trust of your congregation, it could be a sign that one of your pastoral predecessors was spiritually abusive. I have identified four tools to help recognize prior and prevent future spiritual abuse and rebuild trust in a wounded and wary congregation.

If you are available for an all-day, free workshop at Pine Lake United Methodist Camp on Monday, August 5, 2024, and are willing to commit to selecting two of the four tools you will learn and implementing them in your congregation for the following 6-7 weeks, please contact me in a confidential email at: rvoss1@united.edu for more information.

Thank you!

Rebecca Borke
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I did not try to reach potential pastoral participants who lived out of state, since the intended training site is in central Wisconsin. Therefore, focusing on Wisconsin clergy seemed to be logistically and contextually appropriate. The study was also limited to clergy who were experiencing challenges in their congregations that they suspected may have resulted from prior spiritual abuse. I planned to limit this to three to five pastors since more would be too much for case study methodology, and fewer would yield limited data in a narrower sector. Because I am neither trained nor credentialed to counsel people who have been sexually abused, I also refrained from having participants who serve a congregation that had more recent sexual abuse by a pastor. A final requirement for clergy participants was that they would each have served at least one year in their church and were not planning on being relocated or retiring within a year of the study.

The project was approved to utilize a mixed methodology of qualitative case studies, narrative research, and directed theory research over eight weeks. Every successive pastor and congregation are affected by spiritual abuse in unique ways. This study aimed to understand better if, how, and why those differences exist. Even more so, the study sought to discover which, if any, and to what extent the tools developed were effective in reestablishing trust.

The primary participants were to be clergy who were serving a congregation where a predecessor (not necessarily the most recent) had spiritually abused church members. The secondary participants were their church members, who were instructed by tools the clergy participants were trained to utilize in their congregations. Through surveys, discussions, and interviews, it would be possible to learn whether some commonalities or distinctions are important to consider when attempting to rebuild trust in a congregation that has been spiritually betrayed.

Both primary (clergy) and secondary (congregational) participants were to be surveyed with the same pre- and post-project questionnaires to measure their understanding before and after being taught the tools that might help rebuild trust. Before beginning the clergy training sessions, I was prepared to give each participant a pre-workshop survey to complete before gathering everyone together. This would establish a data baseline that would be compared to the same survey given after the tools were taught. The individual surveys could then be analyzed for signs of qualitative growth. The questions asked included:

1. How do you define spiritual abuse?

2. What are symptoms of spiritual abuse that you might see in a parishioner?

3. Describe how the spiritual abuse caused by a clergy predecessor could affect your ministry with them.

4. Write a list of 10-12 skills and character traits that clergy should be expected to have. Circle what you think are the three most important ones.

5. If you were a lay member of a church that has recently experienced spiritual abuse, which of those skills or character traits would you prioritize? Place a rectangle around the three most important ones from their perspective.

6. How do you define forgiveness?

7. What advice would you give someone who was spiritually abused and is struggling to understand or practice forgiveness toward their former pastor?

8. What is your experience and impression of the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer? How might using it affect recovery from spiritual abuse?

I prepared six sessions of written and visual materials. Each includes about 1500 words of text, a PowerPoint presentation, relevant hymns and prayers, and discussion questions that a pastor or church leader could easily adapt to use in worship and/or small groups for up to six weeks or combined into a workshop. I requested that they implement at least two of the six sessions in their churches. Multiple options would be offered to the pastoral participants so they could discern and choose what and how they felt would be most appropriate for their context. This study sought to understand which sessions (foundations) were selected more or less frequently, and whether clergy preferred to present the materials through sermons and worship, a study group, or a workshop.

Though several pastors responded with interest in participating in the study, most of them were unable to due to numerous factors. Some were not currently serving a

church with known spiritual abuse but shared stories of difficulties they faced in previous churches. A couple of pastors would have qualified as primary participants but had scheduled renewal leave during the time limits of this study. In the end, only one pastor was able to participate. After conferring about the situation with the mentors of my cohort and the professors overseeing the Institutional Review Board, they recommended that I proceed with this single pastor and their congregation as the sole case study.

Implementation

Contextual and Professional Associates contributed to preparing this project for implementation in several ways. First, they helped clarify the direction and design of the project. They each offered relevant experience to influence the project's implementation positively. Before the project began, they each read the materials I prepared for the project and suggested improvements.

The Context Associates include Jami Kaiser, Julie Miehe, Rev. Mike Zahn, and Rev. Brian LeBaron. Jami Kaiser recently completed a master's degree in business psychology and has experience as a counselor, professional coach, business owner, and organizational leader. Julie Miehe is a member of First Wausau UMC, a retired Registered Nurse, a Certified Lay Speaker, and is employed as the Discipleship Director at First Wausau UMC. She also volunteers as the Dean of the Wisconsin United Methodist Conference Board of Laity's "Faith Alive" program. She serves on the Northeast District Board of Directors for United Women in Faith.

Two clergy are also included as contextual associates. Rev. Mike Zahn was a member and lay leader at First Wausau UMC for over two decades. He answered a

calling two years ago to become a Licensed Local Pastor and serves two UM churches about twenty and thirty miles north of Wausau. Rev. Brian LeBaron is a recently retired UMC pastor and a licensed professional counselor (LPC) who is a practicing in both Wisconsin and Illinois. He has experience both as a pastor who has followed a spiritually abusive predecessor as well with counseling those with religious trauma. He also volunteered to be the primary referral for study participants who indicated a need for more professional therapy.

These four contextual associates each reviewed either the four foundations as written for the Candidacy Review Packet, or the six sessions of resources based on those four foundations. All but one of the contextual associates are long-time United Methodists. This lack of Christian diversity may be a limiting factor in whether people of a wide variety of Christian traditions would resonate with the tools that were developed by a United Methodist pastor and for a United Methodist context.

In addition to the input from the Contextual Associates, I also extended an open invitation to anyone in my congregation who heard the sermon series on Rebuilding Trust that I used as the prototype for the study. Several of them gave feedback on the parts of the series that were most relevant for them and shared follow-up thoughts and questions they had been pondering since hearing the messages.

It was helpful to learn from each of the contextual associates and congregation members. Their collective suggestions to change, delete, or add material made the tools more meaningful for others struggling to rebuild trust. Their recommendations were gratefully received and implemented. They helped shape the six sessions in ways they found most helpful to reestablish trust after a spiritual betrayal.

The Professional Associates include Rev. Dr. Scott Carlson and Rev. Dr. Gary Holmes. They both have many years of pastoral experience and recognition of the challenges of pastoring a congregation after a spiritually abusive predecessor. With Dr. Carlson's many years serving on the Cabinet giving him a broader Conference-wide perspective, and Dr. Holmes's expertise in healthy discipleship, each has strengths to help congregations recover so they can flourish. Their advice in forming this study prepared it to be more fruitful in congregational life.

The mentors of our cohort, Rev. Dr. Brian Law, and Rev. Dr. Sue Nilson Kibbey opened the floodgates for the focus of this paper and project. Along with United Faculty Rev. Dr. Tolly Kennan and Rev. Dr. Madeline Henners, their constant prayer, faithful encouragement, and collective wisdom guided me through the challenges and insights I have learned in this doctoral journey.

After the prototype tools were developed, implemented, and improved, it was time to begin the official project. As a mixed-method qualitative study, the sole clergy participant was an ideal case to learn with. He is a young adult, ordained clergyperson in a mainline denomination. He previously served as an associate pastor of a large congregation in another state before being called to pastor a smaller, recovering church. This congregation had been without a pastor for four years before he was called and moved to serve them a year ago. Their previous pastor had been spiritually abusive and was eventually removed by their bishop. Some people loyal to his predecessor were upset by the bishop's action and transferred to another church in the same denomination about fifteen miles away. Those who remained relied on lay leadership for the intervening years.

Before the training commenced, the clergy participant first signed the consent form and then completed the initial questionnaire to establish his views before the sessions began. His responses are in italics:

1. How do you define spiritual abuse?

I can think of two different ways that spiritual abuse can be defined: one is using the teachings of the Church to manipulate people in unhealthy ways. I think of the theologian and pastor John Howard Yoder and his "spiritualizing" of sex to manipulate young women into inappropriate relationships with him. The second is misusing the office of a priest or bishop to hurt people, using the pulpit or the office to give backing to that abuse. Such as calling individuals out in the parish during a sermon.

2. What are symptoms of spiritual abuse that you might see in a parishioner?

Lack of trust in the pastor, perhaps staying away from the parish, and over-submissiveness to parish authorities.

3. Describe how the spiritual abuse caused by a clergy predecessor could affect your ministry with a congregation.

As one in that situation currently, I have noticed a long trust-building process between myself as a priest and the congregation. There was, and still is in some ways, a hesitancy to come and talk to me directly because of the prior pastor's behavior when people would bring him concerns directly.

4. Write a list of 8–10-character traits and skills that clergy should be expected to have. Highlight what you think are the three most important ones.

1. *Trustworthiness and discretion*
2. *Patience*
3. *Humility*
4. *Orthodox belief*
5. *Submission to authority*
6. *A genuine love for people*
7. *A healthy prayer life*
8. *(if married) a healthy life-giving marriage*
9. *Temperate in all things*

5. If you were a lay member of a church that has recently experienced spiritual abuse, which of those skills or character traits would you prioritize? Write down the three most important ones from their perspective.

-Patience
-Humility
-Love for people

7. How do you define forgiveness?

The releasing of anger on your end and the releasing of debt towards those who have slighted or wronged you. Forgiveness is necessary, but boundaries can still be set even if you have forgiven someone. Forgiveness does not always mean a full restoration of a relationship.

7. What advice would you give someone who was spiritually abused and is struggling to understand or practice forgiveness toward their former pastor?

I think I would try and help them understand the nature of sin, and that pastors, priests, and bishops are just as susceptible to sin, perhaps more so, than the average person. A pastor who spiritually abused them will have to answer for that abuse when he or she stands before the judgment seat, and all we can do on our end is forgive them and pray for their repentance and flourishing. That does not mean that you have to maintain any sort of relationship with them or with that parish church where the abuse happened. You can have sympathy for their failures and sympathy for their sinful nature, pray for their flourishing, and still keep your distance from them and carry hurt from that abuse.

8. Have you seen prayer being used to spiritually harm people? How? How might prayer be practiced to help recover from spiritual abuse?

I have seen it mostly in evangelicalism, with which I have only limited engagement. I have seen prayers where someone's besetting sin was outed to a group by name in a prayer. I have seen pastors pray that someone would learn to submit to their pastor. All of those things seemed pretty unhealthy to me. Not to say that this never happens in [his denomination] *or other mainstream protestant traditions, but the use of liturgical prayer does seem to curtail the practice.*

I have seen an unfortunate use of deliverance prayers, or exorcism, used in a pastorally abusive way. In [another region], *a priest was using the solemn rite of exorcism, a final sacramental, as a way to shame difficult children and "quarrelsome" wives publicly.*

> *I do think prayer can be used to help recover from spiritual abuse. The Lord's Prayer gives us the blueprint for prayers of forgiveness, highlighting the sin of the world and our role in repairing the damage from our own sin and the sin of others: forgiveness and prayer for those who harm us.*

After he emailed his responses to this initial questionnaire, I sent him the written and visual materials I had prepared for all six sessions. We arranged that he would read and review the materials prior to the training times. Rather than meet at a retreat center for a full day, we decided to meet in his church office on two days, about two weeks apart, for about two hours each day. The first day would cover sessions one, two, and three, and the second day would cover sessions four, five, and six. Because he would have already read and processed the information from the tools I had sent him, we could focus our time together on learning more about his experiences and reactions to the materials, both personally and pastorally. Given the goal of qualitative case study research, the training sessions would focus on learning whether and what he considered accurate and/or relevant in each tool and applicable to his experience and context. I also asked what information he would omit or change and why.

The sequence of all six sessions was selected as a proposed progression of how a congregation might best rebuild trust. Our first meeting focused on "Recognizing Spiritual Abuse," "Reclaiming the Truth," and "Recommitting to Clergy Character and Competence." "Recognizing Spiritual Abuse" is not based on one of the four foundations, but it was used as the first session to establish an understanding of the nature of spiritual abuse and several examples of how it affects both congregations and the broader culture. The participant described the nature and signs of spiritual abuse that he had seen in his past and present contexts.

We then discussed the material in the tool called “Reclaiming the Truth.” This is based on the Interdisciplinary Foundation of Impression Management. Though this foundation is the last one in the paper, I positioned it as the first foundational tool in the study to increase the awareness of spiritual abuse and hopefully engage more people who had been unknowing victims of nefarious impression management tactics by a previous pastor. The clergy participant shared examples of Impression Management he had seen in church life, both in healthy and abusive ways, in his past and current congregations. The last third of our initial meeting focused on the tool called “Recommitting to Clergy Character and Competence.” This is based on the Biblical Foundation of Titus 1:5-9. The pastor heartily affirmed the centrality of moral integrity and skills in clergy and recognized the importance on a personal and collegial level. Our first meeting provided helpful insights into the first three tools and how he, and potentially other pastors, could use them personally and professionally.

At the second meeting, we discussed his thoughts on the other two tools, spread over three sessions. The Theological Foundation of Forgiveness is a tool with several dimensions and nuances that would be too intense for many people, especially those scarred by spiritual abuse, to learn and process in just one session. Therefore, it was divided into two sessions: “Rethinking Forgiveness” and “Releasing Forgiveness.” The participant discussed his personal and pastoral experiences regarding the nature of forgiveness, how he has seen forgiveness presented using both healthy and distorted theology, and the unique dynamics of forgiveness in a person or congregation that has been spiritually abused.

The final tool and the last session focused on the Historical Foundation of Wesleyan Covenant Renewal and Prayer. This had been chosen as the concluding session because it offers a way to reaffirm trust primarily in God. At the same time, it provides a congregational experience to better recognize and live with humility and integrity and commit to mutuality in a lived faith. Though the clergy participant is not from a Wesleyan tradition, he affirmed the role of congregational prayer, specifically the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer (or similar adaptation), as an essential aspect of healing, both individually and collectively, from pastoral betrayal.

The second meeting concluded with an initial plan for him to use some of the tools he had been trained to implement in his congregation. He stated that he thought all six sessions were valuable and said he planned to use all of them as a small group study with the people in his church that he knew were most deeply affected by spiritual abuse. I gave him blank consent forms to use for each person in the small group he would lead. We arranged for him to set the dates and for me to attend the six sessions primarily to learn through observation but also to be available for clarification, referral to professional therapy, or other needs that arise.

Multiple attempts were made to follow up with scheduling those sessions with the secondary participants from his congregation. Several emails, texts, and calls were made over the next month, and he confirmed that he was still eager to implement the tools in his church. In the end, his other responsibilities consumed the limited time to complete this project as it was designed. After consulting with the mentors of my cohort and the professors overseeing the Institutional Review Board and project approval process, they

encouraged me to learn from the available information and data and why it did not prove possible to complete the study as I had envisioned.

Summary of Learning

This study hypothesized that by equipping pastors with tools developed to rebuild trust after spiritual abuse, there would be signs of improved awareness of spiritual abuse and positive effects related to healthier relationships with trustworthy clergy. Because the implementation phase of the study was limited to only one primary (clergy) participant, his responses to each question are summarized as follows.

What is the extent of pre-existing knowledge among clergy to be able to identify spiritual abuse? What are the benefits of an increased understanding of spiritual abuse?

In his denomination, he knew of clergy who were spiritually abused by bishops. In Wisconsin, there was an abusive bishop, who followed an "absent" bishop. For example, the abusive bishop would often bring up priests on false charges. After many years, the current bishop who eventually replaced the abusive bishop (described by the participant as spiritually healthy and pastorally wise) recognizes the pain this created for clergy and their churches by extension. This bishop describes the effects of his spiritually abusive predecessor as creating "Father issues" in both clergy and congregations. Another example the participant shared is from a very large church with nine rectors. One of them had multiple affairs before being moved to another church, where he continued the pattern of affairs with parishioners.

In the church he now serves, his predecessor used the pulpit to mock parishioners' weight as well as other insults. When the congregation requested an investigation and assistance from the bishop, the priest retaliated and scoffed at mediation attempts. The participant has seen the effects of spiritual abuse and described signs of trauma, such as the congregation being more reactive and not as logical. He stated that it takes constant, long-time efforts to prove trustworthiness after an abusive predecessor. There is a heightened tendency for triangulation in relationships because people are afraid to go to the pastor directly. The congregation assumes the worst of people and their intentions. He has seen this extends not only to clergy who replace the abusive pastor but pastors in general.

In addition, there is great distrust and division among parishioners who did not see the same abusive side of their former pastor. Related to this, the abusive priest had "favorites," but still talked poorly about them behind their backs. This continues to cause lingering distrust and division between people. As an ongoing example, the participant described how the families who were upset that their pastor was removed from ministry left to join another church in the same denomination. However, that church had become so small that it was about to close. With no other churches in their denomination nearby, the people in the participant's congregation had a mix of both hope and dread that the people who left them would return. As a pastor, he recognizes the great challenges and opportunities this would bring. We both acknowledge that there will always be those who are not able or willing to recognize spiritual abuse. More study and research are warranted in exploring how to best spiritually lead and care for those who feel they and/or their pastor were falsely wronged despite evidence to the contrary.

The participant offered helpful reflections on the contents of the first session. He said there was nothing he would say or do differently. He also noted the erosion of confidence in our profession. His primary insight was that clergy and congregations need a healthier understanding of ordained ministry and how it does not prevent clergy from sinning. He expressed that the challenge is how clergy may be more apt to fail because spiritual power is more likely to corrupt. To prevent becoming abusive, pastors need a healthy prayer life, a willingness to submit to the teachings of Christ, and be accountable to a Bishop and/or Spiritual Director.

The participant noted that his predecessor engaged in the dark Impression Management tactic of blame-shifting when he accused the congregation of being homophobic. This was clearly not the truth since the congregation had fully known and accepted that this pastor was a gay married man when they called him to be their Rector. In addition, the clergy participant noted a straightforward way of identifying a dark tactic of Impression Management through the use of a pseudo-apology followed by the word "but." Whether used by a pastor in a spiritually abusive way, or any person to deflect or minimize their responsibility, it is akin to false confession and repentance. To overcome these types of blame and denial, he finds it takes constant work to help others understand and always to be open to constructive criticism.

In response to the abuse at this church, and before this clergy participant was called to lead this church, the congregation consulted with an organization called ChurchWerkes[2]. It specializes in four general areas, as stated on their website:

1. planning and change

[2] ChurchWerkes. https://churchwerkes.com/.

2. conflict management
3. leadership development
4. search processes

Some of that organization's work was helpful, such as a congregational dinner where they shared their experiences to expose the darkness. It was described as a "bloodletting." Though this pastor was not yet present for this process, he believes that ChurchWerkes misdiagnosed the church's problems. The report suggests the congregation's challenges all stem from their sense of loss from the pastor who served before the abusive pastor. He was a beloved priest who had led them for twenty-three years. In their written report, ChurchWerke's challenged the church "to get over" their former long-term pastor. Both the congregation and their current pastor acknowledge that it is always difficult to follow the long tenure of a well-regarded pastor. However, it is never helpful to misappropriate blame for suffering caused by the spiritual abuse of a pastor's successor.

In addition to that critical report with simplistic recommendations, their bishop at the time had also written a letter of criticism regarding the congregation. As can be expected, neither ChurchWerkes nor the bishop were helpful in their critical approaches. Neither recognized the significant and lingering effects of spiritual abuse. Due to such oversight, the suffering of the congregation continued and even deepened.

What would be truthful or helpful in congregational or denominational response to allegations of abuse?

In the participant's ecclesial tradition, allegations of abuse are held completely in the hands of the bishop. Though he believes that laity should not have a role in the ordination process, the participant stated that he would like to see more accountability and an appeals process. This would prevent a bishop from becoming too passive and failing to protect a congregation or from misusing their own spiritual authority and becoming heavy-handed. These two extremes were represented in the prior two aforementioned bishops. The first one was "absent," and his successor was abusive.

Based on learning more from Titus 1:5-9, is there an increase in self-awareness and willingness to be accountable based on biblical clergy qualifications?

The participant noted a distinction in his own self-presentation, between being a priest "Father" and a man, husband, father to their child, and friend. He holds strong convictions of always wearing a clerical collar in public and full vestments in worship. Likewise, he is always referred to as "Father" by all but his wife and closest clergy friends. I asked him whether he did this to as a reminder for those not used to the spiritual authority of a young priest. He did not think that was a factor, and envisioned that he would always hold to these signs of "high church" clergy. Despite any stereotypes of formal titles and garb, the participant also shared, "It [Impression Management] only works if the priest is holy and humble." He continued saying that clergy are "the worst," and easily become like Pharisees.

He believes that part of the problem goes back to seminaries in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s that taught clergy to "be ourselves" instead of priestly. He posits that led to an increase in abuse and a decline in biblical teaching. He said, "Priests don't share in Christ's Kingship but in Christ's humility." The participant also believes that clergy often go into the ministry to gain respect and influence. They look for other highs after they get that and the "high" fades. Whatever the addiction is, it often leads to becoming spiritually abusive.

What do you look for to determine whether and to what extent you can trust a pastoral colleague?

The first sign the participant looks for is how they treat their spouse and/or children, and how they conduct their lives. He then notices whether they give unsolicited advice, act in patronizing ways, and whether they muscle their way into proximity to power. These are all signs of insecurity to him, which reveal a propensity for spiritual abuse.

What suggestions would you make for clergy credentialing/ordination to reduce risks of clergy abuse?

The participant believes that during the clergy ordination phase, there needs to be a more thorough emphasis on seeing clergy candidates manage their lives well rather than showing off their theological prowess. During the initial stages, he believes the ordination process should place less emphasis on "right thinking" and more on "right living." The right beliefs can and should be taught in seminary. Additionally, if the pastoral

requirements of Titus 1 are not describing a potential pastor, then alarm bells should go off for those on the ordination board.

Based on learning more about the theological nuances regarding forgiveness, how does this affect their personal understanding, change their approach to teaching forgiveness, and show signs of affecting a congregation recovering from spiritual abuse?

The participant reported that both sessions on "Rethinking Forgiveness" and "Releasing Forgivingness" were helpful pastorally. He stated that "right relationship is not one size fits all" and reflected on how he has worked to forgive someone yet not allow them into his life again. His personal experience has given him pastoral wisdom in how he helps others process forgiveness that focuses on "release" rather than reconciliation. He also found the "SCORE" method of assessing an apology to be helpful. He envisioned it not only as something to teach a congregation, but primarily as something that he (and other clergy) should implement in daily life and then model well to a church.

These two sessions also evoked some theological questions and concerns for the participant. First, he questioned Martin Luther and his statement that interpersonal forgiveness is evidence of divine forgiveness. The participant believes that interpersonal forgiveness must be more than evidence – it is a divine command for people to forgive one another. Another scriptural connection that he made was with the story of Jesus forgiving and reinstating Peter in the Gospel of John, chapter 21. Christ's Church, as well as individual congregations, have a role in binding and loosing those who have betrayed their faith. The participant noted that God's grace (and mandate) can be evidenced in

learning how to forgive, with either and/or both accountability and release applied in ways appropriate to the person or situation.

Based on learning more about the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer and how to apply it to help a congregation restore trust and faith, what (if any) improvements in personal and/or congregational dynamics are noted?

The participant described this final tool as "landing the plane." The previously used analogy of a betrayed congregation being similar to a poorly built aircraft seemed to be a meaningful metaphor. Maybe this tool inspired hope for congregational safety and trust based on a wing and a prayer. However it was interpreted, the metaphors converged into an image of a trustworthy pastor serving as a flight attendant or even co-pilot with passengers who need reassurance. Whether they had fears based on lack of competency or character of the plane's builders, maintenance staff, or cockpit crew, they would understandably be much more wary and watchful to ensure everyone arrives together safely to their destination.

Though the participant is not Wesleyan, he found the Covenant service and prayer to be meaningful and applicable to his and all Christian churches. In addition to the description and instructions for ways to implement this tool, the participant was particularly drawn to the optional use of closing this session, and the study as a whole, with communion. Because communion is intrinsically connected to reconciliation, he pondered how to practice communion when people may have been able to forgive, but are not yet (or ever) able to reconcile. He noted that he would advise his congregation to pray and believe that full reconciliation awaits us in the eschaton. However, he desired to

see more study and reflection done to examine the sacramental reality and implications of extending communion to those who are not yet reconcilable in this age. The participant gave the example of a pastor who betrayed a church and moved away without repentance, transformation, and reconciliation. What would be the spiritual consequences of them taking communion, even separated by time and space, in such an unworthy manner? He hoped that this could be studied more theologically, and policies put in place to address any theological and spiritual problems resulting from unreconciled communion.

Which of the four tools were selected most often by the clergy as likely being the most helpful and why?

Though the participant stated his desire to use all six sessions (and four tools) in a small group setting, he did not implement them during the time limitations of this project. As of now it is still unknown whether he did not have or make the time to implement this. If he had used all four tools as he had proffered, the question of which tools were selected would still be unanswered. Further study is suggested to discover which resources of these types are selected most often by clergy wanting to assist their congregation in healing from spiritual abuse.

After implementing the two tools they selected, what (if any) changes or outcomes do they see in their contexts, and which tool resulted in the most improvement? Would they try either of the other tools in the future?

As with the previous question, the lack of a group of secondary participants precludes any answers to these questions for now. It is hoped that more research will be

done in the future to learn which tools show the most improvement. In addition, there are a myriad of other tools that could also be developed and proven effective.

Summary of Learning

Though this study did not go as planned or prepared, there were many things learned, both directly and indirectly. Despite having only one participant, he described several additional forms and factors of spiritual abuse that make it a difficult problem to both diagnose and address. For instance, there are clergy in parishes who suffer spiritual abuse from those in ecclesial authority over them. They often have little, if any, recourse in addressing this when their livelihoods depend on the whims and control of the bishop or superintendent who wields power over their employment and position. How do they find help in naming, correcting, and healing from spiritual abuse themselves? If they can not, does that lead to a greater possibility that they might perpetuate that spiritual abuse toward others, as in the maxim “hurt people hurt people”?

Based on the overall negative reaction and outcomes to the consultation by ChurchWerkes and the rebuke from the church's former bishop in this study, I learned that pastoral and congregational care must become more trauma informed, not just by pastors, but by all in denominational leadership. Though it may not be necessary for most church consultants or overseers to become experts in spiritual abuse and methods of assisting people and parishes recovering from religious trauma, the experience of this wounded congregation reveals the necessity of training clergy leaders to understand and sensitively address the root causes and effects of spiritual abuse. In addition, they must be

able to properly refer those affected to the care of a specially trained organization, such as GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment).

An unexpected learning occurred soon after the sessions with the participant. As I was greeting people in my own congregation before worship, I met a first-time visitor. She introduced herself to me and explained that her church had just closed the previous week, and she was looking for a new church. Then she added that she had been a member of another church for most of her life, and she named the same church in my study. She expressed her dismay over how her pastor had been forced out and how that experience deeply damaged her trust in the others in that congregation. I was about to begin worship and quickly offered to listen to her experiences, thoughts, and feelings another time. She has returned to worship nearly every Sunday since then and expresses how meaningful she finds the services but has not yet scheduled a time for pastoral care. In the meanwhile, it is an opportunity to learn and discern how to spiritually care for those who are hurt, but who see a very different agent of harm.

The hypothesis could neither be supported nor negated due to the failure of the project to be fully implemented. However, the preparations made for the project's prototype used in the context of my church showed support that the tools were useful in rebuilding trust and helping a congregation learn how to discern who, what, and when to trust. The lessons from this study are still routinely discussed by different church members. For example, people on the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) have repeatedly referred to the tools they learned and applied them in hiring practices.

There needs to be much more research into other potential tools to assist those who have been spiritually abused, as well as learning the best methods and practices in

implementing them. I hope that those who are trained and qualified to address the tragic consequences of sexual abuse by clergy will deepen and broaden their scope and availability to provide care for those affected, both directly and indirectly. Likewise, further study is warranted to know how to best prevent people with abusive tendencies from becoming clergy or church leaders, as well as how to remove them from ministry more accurately and quickly when abuse is discovered.

Another area for ongoing research involves exploring any connections between certain theological and biblical interpretations and a propensity for abuse. Anecdotal evidence suggests that extremes in theology and interpretation may correlate with an increased risk for spiritual abuse. If research finds this to be true, that could have a profound impact on the parameters for acceptable theology in a variety of faith traditions.

Finally, it could be helpful to identify and name the various "subtypes" of spiritual abuse. Are there different best practices in addressing each type of spiritual abuse? What makes different people or churches more of a target for different types of abuse? What can be done to "abuse-proof" a church? This could include following recommended Safe Sanctuary policies, following financial policies to prevent embezzlement, and training pastor and staff committees, and many other possibilities that deserve to be researched.

Conclusion

This project sought to find out whether and to what extent the following hypothesis could be supported: Pastors who follow a spiritually abusive predecessor often struggle to gain the trust of the congregation. If pastors participate in a case study about

spiritual abuse, then they will be equipped with resources to help their parishioners begin recovering from previous abusive pastors.

Despite the prototype for the project being well-received at First Wausau UMC, the project could not be fully implemented as designed and, therefore, did not work as intended. Though the incomplete outcome of the project failed to affirm the hypothesis, it does not imply the hypothesis is not true. However, the testing methods, timing, or both were not conducive for gathering conclusive evidence in either proving or disproving the hypothesis.

Despite these problems, the study provided many helpful insights. Even before it officially began, the process of developing and sharing the prototype with my congregation as a six-week worship series received incredibly positive responses. It continues to be a point of reference for congregation members as they learn to recognize not only spiritual abuse but similarities they see in political rhetoric and abusive policies, especially to vulnerable people. Despite having only one primary participant, the experiences he shared and insights he offered corroborated with my research and hypothesis.

Yet another analogy could be drawn between a problematic Boeing plane and the inability to get this project off the runway. Many things did not go well, starting with difficulty in finding clergy participants. There are many theories as to why, starting with stated reasons such as bad timing or not currently meeting the study's parameters. However, neither of those reasons could have been adjusted significantly to improve the odds of successfully completing the project.

Therefore, I suspect there are other more "hidden" reasons for a lack of clergy participants. Is there a sense of shame in clergy who are facing the consequences of a predecessor's abuse, which makes them hesitant to admit that they and their congregations are struggling? This could prevent clergy from wanting to participate, especially since many are untrained in identifying spiritual abuse, let alone being prepared to address it. Another factor could be concerns over implementing another pastor's materials, which have not yet been proven effective. Though many of the clergy contacted for the study are in mainline denominations that ordain female clergy, those whose church traditions do not interpret Scripture as supporting both male and female clergy would be reticent to participate in a study developed by a female pastor.

The other main obstacle to the success of this project was the lack of a congregation as "secondary" participants. Without them, there was no way to determine which, if any, tools were most helpful in rebuilding their trust in a healthy pastor. Because this study only had one clergy participant, it was dependent on his ability to plan a congregational study utilizing at least two of these tools. I am aware of several factors in his life that have limited his schedule, but had not anticipated that he would not follow through with this part of the study.

If I could reattempt this study in the future, I would probably find a way to implement it online to draw from a national (and possibly international) pool of pastors and parishes. I would also reconsider including my own congregation as study participants, rather than limiting them to prototype testers. Realistically, all research is using a prototype. The results are then used to change and improve the tools to be more effective or change the purpose of the tools to address a different problem.

In addition to the ways previously described that my congregation benefited from the prototype worship series, the pastor who participated in the two training sessions stated that he found the information and material to be helpful. I am not sure if or how he will use it in the future. I have asked him to let me know, even though it would happen after the time limitations of this study are over.

As I meet more pastors and learn about the pain in their congregations caused by a spiritually abusive predecessor, it reiterates the need for well-trained and trauma-informed people and resources that can help alleviate their suffering and stop abusers from continuing in the ministry. If the tools developed through this research help accomplish that goal, then the study will fulfill its purpose. To the extent any resources developed could be beneficial to the needs of those harmed by spiritual abuse, it would be an honor to have them published and available to as many people as possible.

The study of trust, and specifically how to rebuild trust after betrayals of many kinds, will continue to be a subject that will certainly be helpful to understand in ministry and life. Though it would be assuring to learn fail-proof methods of knowing who and how to trust, this study has also revealed that there is no spiritual vaccine to prevent pastoral abuse. The challenge is learning and helping others to move forward after trust has been betrayed without our faith in God or the Church being destroyed.

APPENDIX

RESOURCES FOR REBUILDING TRUST AFTER SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Rebuilding Broken Trust after Spiritual Abuse

Rev. Rebecca Borke, First Wausau United Methodist Church

Week 1: Recognizing Broken Trust: Ez. 34:1-10, 2 Peter 2:1-3

Hymns: Savior Like a Shepherd, There's a Wideness in God's Mercy, Be Still My Soul

Week 2: Reclaiming the Truth: Zechariah 11:4-17

Hymns: My Faith Looks Up to Thee, Come and Find the Quiet Center,
Help Us Accept Each Other

Week 3: Recommitting to Character and Competency: Titus 1:5-9

Hymns: Where He Leads Me, I Will Follow, Just As I Am, I Want a Principle Within

Week 4: Rethinking Forgiveness: John 8:3-11

Hymns: Nothing But the Blood of Jesus, Hope of the World,
God of Grace and God of Glory

Week 5: Releasing Forgiveness: Matthew 18:21-35

Hymns: Grace Greater Than Our Sin, Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive, Grace Alone

Week 6: Renewing Covenant Prayer: 2 Chronicles 15:1-15

Hymns: Take My Life, and Let It Be, Living for Jesus, O Jesus, I Have Promised

Today is the first of a six-week series on Rebuilding Trust. A big "thank you" goes to Jon Goertz, who designed the images for this series. When I saw how he pictured today's theme, ***Recognizing Broken Trust***, as an old, beat-up chair, it caused two thoughts to spring into mind. The first is that when our trust has been broken, we feel like that chair that has been used and abused. My next thought was of an episode of Big Bang Theory, where they discover a decent-looking chair left for free outside their apartment building and bring it upstairs to their apartment. With growing concerns about what germs or insects the chair may harbor, it gets passed around their apartments, and they eventually steam clean it. But the problem with the chair is that it is much bigger. A scene toward the end shows movement under the fabric, which looks like a large rodent. The final scene shows the chair returned to the curbside, likely to be taken home by someone else glad to get a free chair.

When we are surprised by different problems lurking beneath the surface, our trust is broken. We feel broken and pained, like a chair with a popped spring or torn upholstery. Sometimes, broken trust is seen and evident to all; other times, it has remained hidden with lingering dangers. Betrayed trust in churches is challenging. Often, some people have been deeply hurt, and others in the same congregation are blinded by the "strong and charismatic" leader and keep them on a throne where Christ should be. Though we could each tell painful stories, I will share two that happened in my life in recent years and led to this series.

As your pastor in early December of 2021, I was focused on all things Advent and Christmas-related. We were also busy preparing for the arrival of the first Afghan refugees to Wausau. With extra funds saved from Covid relief, my husband and I purchased an old

duplex to fix up and offer affordable housing for our new neighbors. We had a separate bank account for the house with savings for extensive repairs in the future. I wanted to put new flooring in the kitchen, but my husband stopped me and said the account did not have that much anymore. He handled our finances, so when the bank statement arrived, I opened it to see the balance. In addition to a few home materials and repair withdrawals, thousands of dollars were taken out as cash. He claimed his card had been stolen.

Disturbed with doubt, I went to the bank the following day and requested statements from the previous months, each showing thousands in cash withdrawals. The bank also confirmed that his card had not been stolen. When I returned home with the facts, my husband blurted out, "I have a drug addiction, and I didn't want you to find out." I was shocked! A jumbled mess of thoughts and feelings tangled me in knots. How could I have missed entirely that he was using drugs? Is this something he – and we – could ever overcome? I called the counselor he had been seeing for over a year, and even she was surprised by the news. Knowing his background in marketing, she told me, "He is a very, very, very good salesman."

During the ordinarily joyful and expectant season of Advent, I was doing forensic accounting and discovered nearly $80,000 in cash withdrawals he had used to fuel a variety of addictions. My trust and our marriage were destroyed. Only a handful of leaders at church knew about this because it was so personal and raw. I did not want to create a cloud in the church at Christmas time and could not say or pray anything extemporaneously without breaking down. Those leaders discreetly stepped in to teach the children's messages, lead the Prayer Time, and all other times when I did not have the exact words written out. Broken trust takes a huge spiritual toll, and I will always be grateful for those who prayed and kept me from falling apart in front of everyone.

A couple of months later, I received a text from a member of the previous church I served. It was a mug shot of their pastor who had followed me, charged with about twenty counts of child pornography and drug possession. They were blindsided and deeply betrayed by someone supposedly vetted and trained to be trustworthy for the care of their souls. My former church and I shared nightmare experiences of broken trust and wondered if and how we could ever rebuild our lives and faith.

Problems like these have unfortunately plagued God's people for thousands of years. In Ezekiel 34:2-6,10 (MSG), we hear God telling the prophet to warn the so-called spiritual shepherds of Israel: *"Doom to you shepherds of Israel, feeding your own mouths! … you don't feed the sheep. You don't build up the weak ones, don't heal the sick, don't doctor the injured, don't go after the strays, don't look for the lost. You bully and badger them. And now they're scattered every which way because there was no shepherd—scattered and easy pickings for wolves and coyotes. Scattered—my sheep!—exposed and vulnerable across mountains and hills. My sheep scattered all over the world, and no one out looking for them!... "'Watch out! I'm coming down on the shepherds and taking my sheep back. They're*

fired as shepherds of my sheep. No more shepherds who just feed themselves! I'll rescue my sheep from their greed. They're not going to feed off my sheep any longer!"

Jesus describes bad spiritual leaders as "wolves in sheep's clothing" in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:12, NRSV): *Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.* In 2 Peter 2:1-3 (MSG), they are called lying prophets: "*But there were also lying prophets among the people then, just as there will be lying religious teachers among you. They'll smuggle in destructive divisions, pitting you against each other—biting the hand of the One who gave them a chance to have their lives back! They've put themselves on a fast downhill slide to destruction, but not before they recruit a crowd of mixed-up followers who can't tell right from wrong. They give the way of truth a bad name. They're only out for themselves. They'll say anything, anything, that sounds good to exploit you.*

What the Bible describes as selfish shepherds, wolves in sheep's clothing, and lying prophets is what we now call *spiritual abuse*. Spiritual abuse is often characterized by coercion, control, and manipulation. These emotionally abusive tactics become spiritual abuse when perpetrated by a spiritual authority who defends their unholy behavior with a "divine" rationale.[3] Spiritual abuse is also tied to financial abuse by church leaders. This includes embezzlement of church funds, demanding disproportionate income and benefits, and using manipulative techniques to increase offerings. An even more complex and traumatic form of spiritual abuse comes from clergy sexual abuse. Whether with minors or adults, recent or long ago, this is both soul-crushing and often church-killing. Reporting to the police and connecting to licensed therapists are both essential, especially with sexual abuse.

Another example can be found in churches with staff and involved volunteer leaders who had a front-row seat to a pastor's harmful ways. Verbally abusive and controlling pastors turn churches into toxic workplaces. An abusive pastor will often take credit for the faithful work of others. Parishioners are pitted against each other by a pastor eager to create a dramatic distraction. Staff and dedicated volunteers live in fear of angry outbursts and have seen their colleagues fired without cause and shunned by the church. As pressure mounts, the dysfunctional pastor will increase the expectations and pressure on those who remain. Other tell-tale signs of a spiritually abusive church culture include public shaming and a focus on certain scriptures twisted to increase pastoral power and control. Ultimately, grace is withheld from those without power and perverted to justify the immoral behavior of clergy.

Regardless of who, what, and when the abuse occurred, there are lingering effects that can last years, if not generations. Even if those directly and acutely affected are no longer in the church, a dysfunctional church culture often forms in response. For instance, divisions form between those who were harmed and those who believe them, and people who are angry over

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[3] Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 5.

their belief that their pastor was unfairly wronged. The fault line between those who unquestioningly believe their clergy and those who cannot trust the harmful pastor creates the grounds for earthquakes to erupt in the life and relationships of the church. The "after pastor(s)" arrives, often overwhelmed by the complex knot of pain, shame, and distrust in church relationships.

The emotional and spiritual intimacy between a pastor and parishioner can be inspiring and empowering, but it is harmful whenever a clergyperson abuses their power. Confused and conflicted, church members are often left sifting through the rubble of what is or is no longer true about the faith they learned from the abusive pastor. Other clergy members and all they teach and represent become suspicious in the aftermath. Trust in pastors and churches has declined precipitously, especially as pastors' moral failures and deceptive practices have been exposed. In 1975, 68% of the U.S. expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the church, but as of 2022, only 31% do.[4] Similarly, in 1985, 67% of Americans ranked pastors as having "high" or "very high" ethical standards and levels of honesty, but by 2022 that plummeted to only 36%.[5]

These statistics on the levels of confidence and trust in the clergy's ethical standards and honesty are signs that many people have had their trust betrayed by a pastor. Sometimes, trust in pastors in general with every sordid story on the news. My involvement with clergy groups, both within the United Methodist connection and with local interfaith clergy groups, has opened my eyes to many painful experiences that churches have had with religious trauma caused by previous pastors. Sometimes, it is the immediate predecessor, and other times, spiritual abuse occurred decades earlier.

There are a few caveats. First, a significant difference exists between a pastor who has betrayed a church and one who is not a good fit for a particular church. Like all people, clergy are not interchangeable parts. Sometimes, our skills are not well-aligned with the church we serve, and we would be more fruitful elsewhere. Congregations also have different expectations and needs that one pastor cannot meet. Everyone dreams of a pastor who is a great preacher, pastoral counselor, community leader, worship planner, youth and children connector, social media expert, meeting leader, hospital and shut-in visitor, mission developer, fundraiser, and innovator. Different pastors will do some things on that list well, but not most and certainly not all. Churches that prioritize clergy with a drive for attracting more "butts in pews and bucks in offering plates" at any cost are at greater risk of spiritual abuse. The second caveat is that pastors are at higher risk of being falsely accused of misconduct. I know a faithful pastor who was accused of having an affair and put on leave. After months of investigation, it was confirmed that the accuser had entirely made up the

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[4] Aaron Earls, "Pastors and Churches Face Historic Lack of Trust," Lifeway Research, accessed November 21, 2022, https://research.lifeway.com/2022/07/12/pastors-and-churches-face-historic-lack-of-trust/.
[5] Earls, Lifeway Research.

story for attention, but that accusation haunted his whole life and ministry despite his innocence.

There is also an inverse problem. Sometimes, churches can be toxic toward pastors. When I was nineteen and serving as a summer intern at a Lutheran church near La Crosse, one of the pastors showed me a list of ELCA churches in the synod looking for a pastor. One after another, he told me stories of the pastors these churches had chewed up and spit out. It is often a sign of unaddressed spiritual abuse in the distant past. This series cannot address this related issue, but it deserves to be better understood and stopped.

Eight months after the twin betrayals in my marriage and former congregation, I was invited to start a doctoral program. I still wondered if and how trust could be rebuilt in those and related areas of my life. I have experienced and seen other examples of betrayed trust in churches and the emotional and spiritual trauma it causes. While researching the history of this church, I learned of at least three pastors in the past fifty years who have spiritually harmed people in these pews, some sitting here and others who will likely never return because of their spiritual trauma. With guidance from my advisors, I narrowed down the focus of my dissertation and project to "Rebuilding Trust," specifically "in Church Leadership," by "Identifying and Overcoming Spiritual Abuse by Former Pastors." Even if you have not experienced spiritual abuse yourself, I believe this series can help you rebuild trust in healthy ways, no matter how it was broken. In addition, we all can be given a better understanding and empathy for those harmed by pastors and work toward creating a church culture that protects and cares for those who are spiritually wounded.

To know what trust means so that it can be rebuilt, it helps to know that the New Testament Greek word for *trust* is *pistis.* However, *pistis* is nearly always interpreted as the word *faith*. However, the original meaning is more accurately translated as *trust* or *trustworthy*. Biblically speaking, faith and trust are interdependent, if not synonymous. Though many modern people associate the word and idea of *belief* with *faith*, the Greek word *pistis* shows us that faith is more accurately understood as trust, far beyond mere mental understanding and belief. As people of faith, or more accurately, *trust* in God, how can trust be rebuilt in congregations betrayed by a pastor misrepresenting God and what it means to have faith? With the meanings of *faith* and *trust* so tightly woven together that only one word is used to describe both in the Bible, it is imperative that we learn to rebuild trust in more accurate and healthy ways so that our collective faith in God can also be strengthened.

Today is only the first step in learning to recognize spiritual abuse. In the next five weeks, we will learn how to help overcome the harm and prevent others from being hurt by pastors in the future. This includes Reclaiming the Truth, Recommitting to Character and Competence, Rethinking and Releasing Forgiveness, and Renewing Prayer. As we rebuild our trust in response to the messages of this series, we will share a different "Profession of Blessing" written by Dr. Kate Bowler each week. Let us say/pray this responsively as today's blessing

to welcome God's healing presence. Whether you or someone you may know has had their heart betrayed and broken by a faith leader, God comes with both fierceness to confront those who harm God's people and gentleness to rebuild the trust of those who were betrayed.

When Faith Breaks Your Heart [6] by Kate Bowler

Blessed are you standing among the ruins of a faith that once felt so sturdy,
now turned to dust under your feet.

The certainty you once had, gone. The community you loved, dissipated.
The hope you held dear, hard to find.

Instead, what's taken up residence is the very stuff that seems counter to what you imagined:

Disappointment. Doubt. Disillusionment. Despair.

In this new landscape, may you practice the courage to find the others
who make space for your questions without easy answers,

who celebrate doubt when it makes room for more faith,
who search high and low for a defiant hope born amidst despair.

Bless you, dear one. You who don't give up wrestling,
who have eyes to see something new being rebuilt on top of what was.

Blessed are you who walk away wounded, yes. But changed.

Discussion Questions:

1. Share an example of spiritual abuse if you are able or willing.
2. What are some effects of spiritual abuse that people who are unaware or unaffected may not understand?
3. What question related to *Recognizing Spiritual Abuse* do you wish you were asked and would like to answer?

[6] https://katebowler.com/blessings/a-blessing-for-when-faith-breaks-your-heart/ Used with permission.

How we present ourselves matters. From the clothes we wear to the hairs we cut, curl, color, and everything in between, we spend time and money building and maintaining an image. What we post on social media or write in our Christmas letters tells a story to the world about who we are and what we value. Sadly, many people think that our value is proportional to the number of "likes" and "hits" we get. It is not only individuals who work to convey a positive image but organizations as well. Whether corporations with well-funded marketing departments or churches trying to get the word out as affordably as possible, we all want people to like and trust us.

The term "branding" is used by marketers to describe the keywords and images we use to increase our visibility and reputation in the world. There is a corresponding field that studies how we – both individuals and organizations – present ourselves to the world called *Impression Management.* This social science began with a 1956 sociology textbook called "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" by Erving Goffman. Usually, Impression Management aims to increase trust by making positive impressions like intelligence, hard work, honesty, and fairness. Occasionally, people want to make a negative impression, called "strategic incompetence." For example, saying, "I am bad at note taking" or "I can never load the dishwasher well" are tactics of Impression Management used to get out of learning and helping. Impression Management is all about increasing rewards and minimizing consequences. Properly used, it can be a powerful, positive tool.

In a church setting, the rewards and consequences are almost always measured by *attendance* and *giving*. A third dynamic is *morale*, which is more difficult to measure yet undeniably

important. These three pressures are a big responsibility to increase and navigate with integrity. Pastors work hard to ensure their most talented and generous volunteers and donors are committed to the vision and mission of the church. If they are not, they could become upset, expose problematic issues, and leave with their time and treasure. When challenges arise, pastors understandably focus on positive or powerful self-presentation to rescue their image and regain power over others. Motivating others to serve sacrificially is much easier if they highly regard their pastor and church culture.

Though Impression Management techniques can be misused in church, good things are happening in our ministries that we want to share as part of the message of Good News. Accurately telling the stories of how people's lives are being improved can lead to more significant transformation, commitment to Christ, and generosity. There are many examples of ethical ways of making a positive impression that churches could use to broaden and deepen their effectiveness in reaching and leading people to trust in Jesus. Volumes of resources and scores of conferences are available to help church leaders learn how to improve their congregation's ability to make a positive impression to be better ambassadors of Christ. Most of these resources using Impression Management are ethical and potentially fruitful.

That said, Impression Management could be compared to fire in a church. Though fire symbolizes the power of the Holy Spirit and is essential for heat, cooking, and energy, it also has the potential for devasting destruction if left uncontrolled. Similarly, church leaders must learn how to harness the power of Impression Management ethically and honestly while safely protecting individuals, especially the most vulnerable. Today, we will expose how abusive clergy, congregations, and other church-related systems engage in dangerous Impression Management tactics, ways they "burn" victims, and undermine the credibility and witness of the broader church.

Due to the "soundbite" nature of how most people get their information and impressions today, details often need to be omitted for privacy and brevity. This is not an inherent sign that the smiles and glowing testimonials on the posts, videos, or from the pulpit are "fake." However, sometimes, the reality is more disappointing or disturbing than we want to admit. Reality and integrity become compromised in an attempt to protect and manage people's impressions of pastors and churches.

Rev. Dr. Wade Mullen describes how the dark side of Impression Management enables spiritual abuse.[7] To maintain an admirable appearance, pastors and churches attempt to hide whatever may decrease rewards or increase consequences. Out of self- or church-preservation, clergy and leaders fail to disclose unflattering but relevant details. Soon, the focus becomes managing an image rather than addressing the needs and concerns of those who the church or pastor has betrayed. Impression Management becomes perverted and used in response to

[7] Wade Mullen, "Impression Management Strategies Used by Evangelical Organizations in the Wake of an Image-Threatening Event," Dissertation, Capital Seminary and Graduate School, 2018

adverse events to deceive, manipulate, and hold secrets that perpetuate harm. This continues to spiral as a "clan culture mentality" is reinforced and close relational ties are guarded like spiritual hostages.

Before the sociological term "Impression Management" was invented, the prophet Zechariah had enough of people claiming to shepherd God's sheep but only using them as a prop to increase their power and privilege. Writing about 520 years before Jesus was born, Zechariah was sickened by some shepherds entrusted to guard the sheep at the Temple, which had been given and dedicated as an offering to God. Instead, these so-called shepherds sold the sheep and pocketed the money. Zechariah described the brokenness of the entire system and how it was an analogy for leaders who profit off of vulnerable people: *"The people who buy them will butcher them for quick and easy money. What's worse, they'll get away with it. The people who sell them will say, 'Lucky me! God's on my side; I've got it made!' They have shepherds who couldn't care less about them."* (Zech. 11:5, MSG). After some performative prophetic acts, Zechariah heard God describe "*a shepherd indifferent to victims, who ignores the lost, abandons the injured, and disdains decent citizens. He'll only be in it for what he can get out of it, using and abusing any and all…"* (Zechariah 11:16, MSG).

Related to this image of a pastor as a shepherd, we are reminded of the passage from 2 Peter 2 that described 'wolves in sheep's clothing' who prey on the ones they are entrusted to protect. This is a hallmark sign of spiritual abuse. Often subtle and easily overlooked, this dynamic happens when a pastor and church leaders use their influence, authority, and insight to increase their power and control over a situation or person. They misuse their call to serve and abuse their spiritual authority by using it for their benefit rather than to serve those they are called to gently nurture and fiercely protect.[8] They use the dark side of Impression Management to pose like shepherds, but they function more like parasites.

One problem is that spiritually abusive pastors have often convinced themselves that they are being faithful and doing God's will. Spiritual pride can easily blind clergy from ways they may be using or abusing others in the name of faith. This has a disorienting effect on parishioners, who react in several ways. Some people become unthinkingly loyal to the façade of charisma and confidence exuded by a pastor who becomes conflated with God's omnipotence and omniscience. Devotion and support of their pastor become cult-like, and the narcissistic infection becomes systemic. Church staff and active volunteers are often initially devoted and dedicated but then become confused and acutely wounded by a pastor's unreasonable expectations, rapid vacillations, gaslighting, and other forms of abuse. Other people may not have as much proximity, but they may sense that something about the narcissistic pastor is not right and cannot be fully trusted. As a result, they disengage from the church life and even trust in God.

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[8] Dave Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing & Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1991), 175.

The deception wielded through Impression Management is connected to our human ability to use denial as a way of avoiding emotional pain. Denial can be a temporary gift when there is too much pain to bear and function through the demands of life. However, denial can quickly turn into delusion, in which people can no longer discern between what is true or false. In addition to spiritually abusive pastors being in denial about the harm they cause, victims of spiritual abuse often become trapped by a delusion that their pastor could not be in error. If something does not seem right, they blame themselves or someone else, even as victims or innocent bystanders.[9]

In addition to denials, frequently used defensive tactics identified through Impression Management include excuses, justifications, and comparisons.[10] For instance, they may twist scriptures to excuse or justify a person's pain. Many people, myself included, have had a pastor tell them, "You are depressed because of your hidden sin," "Your marriage is suffering because you aren't submitting to your husband's authority," and "If you prayed as I do, then you wouldn't have so many problems."

Abusive pastors use these dark tactics of Impression Management in two ways: to feed their egos and to protect themselves from the consequences of feeding their egos. To add insult to injury, others in the church or denominational leadership will blindly defend and protect the prideful pastor. They might deny any "red flags" that should have stopped the process of the pastor's path to leadership. There may be an excuse of ignorance despite an unwillingness of due diligence. Even when an abusive dynamic can no longer be denied or excused, other tactics focus on shaping the public's perception of the wrong. For instance, statements like "she shouldn't dress that way" or "they have not been innocent" shift the responsibility for the abuse from the abuser to the victim. Another tactic is using comparisons to demonstrate why this accusation should be dismissed. Statements such as "There are bigger problems, and we should not waste our time with petty grievances," "It was just locker room talk," and "It was a misinterpretation of the pastor's warmth and affection" are all tactics used to minimize the allegation of abuse when held in contrast with other issues, cultures, and systems.

Because Impression Management is used both on individual and institutional levels, the term "abuser" could be a person, organization, or both. To apply this to a congregational setting where an abusive pastor may have left but the wounded remain scattered and sore, the leaders of the congregation and/or denomination must step forth to offer a genuine apology for how they failed to keep people spiritually safe from a "wolf in sheep's clothing." Unfortunately, church leaders have too often responded with demonstrations rather than transformation. Examples include incomplete or insincere concessions followed by reassurances that the issues are behind them and all is better and brighter. All too often, they show more concern about the public appearance and approval of the church than the well-being and care of those

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[9] Johnson and Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 180.
[10] Wade Mullen, *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from Its Power* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 103.

harmed. Such a pastor and/or congregational leaders are *"holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them!"*[11]

Understanding the nefarious tactics of Impression Management used by both abusive clergy and unhealthy church systems can lead to better support for those who have been spiritually abused. Congregations and denominations can be equipped to recognize problematic personality traits and consistently expect excellent character and integrity in their leaders. Most importantly, those who are or have been victimized will have more significant opportunities to be heard, believed, and given freedom in their journey toward healing from spiritual and religious trauma.

To overcome the harmful effects of Impression Management, a church, and pastors must demonstrate the opposite spirit and actions of the tactics that contributed to spiritual abuse. Instead of looking away from or ignoring abuse, manipulation, and deception and calling it "forgiveness," a church needs to fully protect the physical, emotional, and spiritual safety of victims of abuse. Silence is tacit approval of harm done, and churches and healthy clergy must find their voice to help identify what caused the pain and start to heal the wounded. Confronting abuse empowers victims and helps prevent others from becoming victims. Some victims of spiritual manipulation are eventually able to recognize the many layers of how they were abused. However, the dark side of Impression Management often impacts them yet again, as they live with the fear that it is better to suppress their experience to maintain a good impression of themselves rather than appear as one who was deceived.

Two of my college friends were married and became pastors in the Vineyard denomination. After planting churches in Iowa City and Mankato, they accepted a call to move to Duluth to serve on the pastoral staff of a mega-church. All seemed to go well until the youth pastor was charged with five counts of sexual abuse. It was especially messy because the youth pastor was also the son of the Senior Pastor. Many leaders would have reacted by using the dark tactics of Impression Management to hide or spin the harm done. Instead, that senior pastor wisely chose to prioritize the most vulnerable – his son's victims and their families – over any sense of duty and protection he would have for his son. Rather than distorting reality to preserve the church he had built and led, he humbly stepped aside. He welcomed the police and an outside ministry group called GRACE, which stands for Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment.[12] Over a year was spent investigating and responding to the depths of the youth pastor's harmful actions and ensuring that there were no other situations where harm could occur. The leaders were transparent and contrite, a decision they knew would cause them to lose many members. This led to a drastic reduction in staff, including my friends. However, the church proved its love for those who were harmed and its integrity in the process. Though this congregation is a lot smaller, it is also much healthier. It is a model of how congregations can resist the dark tactics of Impression Management.

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[11] 2 Timothy 3:5 NRSV.
[12] https://www.netgrace.org/

Understanding the power of Impression Management can help us use it ethically and fruitfully. Conversely, it also helps us recognize signs when church leaders and systems are using Impression Management in ways that cause, deny, or hide spiritual harm. Rather than allowing the truth to be spun, we reclaim the truth that may be initially difficult but will set people free. Next week, we will learn how to rebuild trust-worthy principles and policies based on biblical character and skills. This will help us identify and remove people with abusive tendencies from gaining power or positions in church leadership. Let us take this next step in rebuilding trust by reclaiming the truth. Please join in this responsive blessing to overcome deception and reclaim the truth.

Blessing for Telling the Truth[13] by Kate Bowler

Blessed are you, resisting the urge to reframe. You who are sick and tired of silver linings.

Blessed are you, speaking honestly about what is right in front of you:

This is hard. Things might not get better.

This really has gone horribly. There may not be a different way.

You who risk honesty, especially when the world around us craves a brightside.

Blessed are we in our gratitude and our pain, our pleasures, and our limitations.

Blessed are we, the truth-tellers. Whose candor finds a chorus that echoes back: "Same."

May we feel ourselves answered by this language of love, changed where we can, and confirmed where we can't. But loved, loved, loved all the same. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. What examples of denial, blame-shifting, comparisons, or pseudo-apologies have you seen or experienced by church leaders?
2. What would be truthful and helpful in a congregational or denominational response to allegations of spiritual abuse?
3. What question related to *Reclaiming the Truth* do you wish you were asked that you would like to answer?

[13] https://katebowler.com/blessings/a-blessing-for-telling-the-truth/ Used with permission.

The Boeing aircraft company has recently had a series of life-threatening mid-air problems. Doors, panels, and wheels flew off mid-flight. Two Boeing whistleblowers were found dead. People are understandably afraid to fly in Boeing airplanes, which comprise 42% of the commercial aircraft in the United States. The frightening decline of safety and quality control at Boeing led to a necessary shake-up at the company. On April 1, 2024, business leadership experts Anne Morriss and Frances Frei gave a TED talk on their podcast *Fixable* called "*Unsolicited Advice: Boeing & how to lead in a crisis"*. Ten minutes into their podcast, Frances recommended three elements that Boeing – and any organization – should adopt in order to recommit to quality: *"You have to honor the past. We have to have a clear and compelling change mandate. And we need a rigorous and optimistic way forward. It's always what you do in a crisis."*[14]

In their Ted talk, Anne and Frances explained that companies driven by finances and profits will inevitably have quality problems. Boeing had been known for their excellent quality for over a hundred years, with the slogan "If it isn't Boeing, I'm not going". But then their Chief Financial Officer became their CEO. The love of money grew as a root of all kinds of evil. Before that, engineers had run the company, who were focused on safety and quality performance. For Boeing to become trustworthy again, they would need to recommit putting an engineer at the helm. They also used the example of hospital systems, whose quality is always better when the CEO is a

[14] https://www.ted.com/podcasts/fixable/unsolicited-advice-boeing-how-to-lead-in-a-crisis-transcript, 10:06

physician rather than a Finance Director. Frances explained, *"CFOs can be great CEOs, but only if they have more reverence for the non-financial thing than anyone else in the company."*[15] There are many congregations that might feel like the wheels or doors have come off. There is pressure from parishioners and denominational leaders to focus on numbers – bucks in (offering) plates and butts in pews. A pastor with unresolved issues can find themselves plumping their pride and pockets, instead of being a prophetic voice protecting the vulnerable. Clergy, like the best CEO's of aircraft companies or hospitals, need to be identified as having true reverence, character, and competency.

In a first-century version of Ted Talks now called the letter to Titus, the Apostle Paul described how to identify who has the character and competence needed to lead a church. To better understand the context, Paul assigned and instructed Titus to organize and oversee churches on the island of Crete. Now part of the country of Greece, this island is 160 miles wide and 37 miles north to south. In Biblical times it was known as the birthplace of Zeus, and they worshiped their emperor as the universal savior. There were frequent wars between its cities, and the term "Cretan" became synonymous with "liar." Titus had his work cut out for him to transform the character and reputation of this island, and it started with identifying the right kind of leaders for churches.

Two thousand years later, denominations and many individual congregations still struggle to ensure that the character and competency of clergy candidates are correctly assessed. Today we will learn about necessary and biblical pastoral qualifications. This will help us strengthen our ability to recognize and trust emotionally healthy pastors and reject those whose character is inconsistent with the virtues necessary for Christ-like leadership. You might also consider how this list could help us decide who to vote for as our political leaders. Titus 1:7-8 gives a short yet meaningful summary: *For [an overseer], as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain, 8 but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, self-controlled, upright, devout, and restrained.* The overarching descriptor of a trustworthy pastor in Titus is "blameless." This word in Greek is *anenklētos*, meaning not convictable when a person is properly scrutinized.[16] This is both legal and moral.

Paul warns Titus of five character traits that should disqualify a potential church leader: arrogance, quick-tempered, addicted, violent, and greedy for gain. The Greek words for these illuminate them even more. The first word translated as arrogant, *authade*, means self-indulgent. Signs of self-indulgence include a focus on feeding our own egos, appetites, and unhealed issues. The next word, *orgilos*, is only found here in the whole Bible. It means prone to anger and resentment, nurturing prejudice, and bitterness. The third Greek word, *paroinon*, means being "near wine." Biblical context shows that proximity and even consumption of wine were not the problem, but addiction or abuse of alcohol (and other

[15] https://www.ted.com/podcasts/fixable/unsolicited-advice-boeing-how-to-lead-in-a-crisis-transcript, 17:25
[16] "Strong's Greek: 410," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/410.htm.

kinds of addictions) was (and is) the problem. The fourth word is *plekten*, meaning "a contentious person," which indicates both physical and verbal volatility. The final characteristic to avoid is the Greek word *aischrokerde*. It means "disgraceful profit acquired through 'faith-trading.' We do not have an English word used to describe the dark side of spiritual *quid pro quo*, but the Bible does!

What happens when those red flags in a potential or current pastor's character are ignored or tolerated? Spiritual abuse and religious trauma. In 2018, a study led by Lisa Oakley with Bournemouth University in the UK found that 63% of survey respondents reported various forms of spiritual abuse. With pastors who claimed "divine rationale," nearly two-thirds of people had experienced manipulation, coercion, and control by a spiritual leader. The numbers in this study reflect respondents as a whole, not a particular congregation.[17] Alarming statistics like this led Collin Hansen, editor of the Gospel Coalition, to voice concern. "This is the next pressing issue our churches must face. For far too long we've tolerated this kind of leadership that should plainly disqualify pastors by several standards in Titus 1:7-8"[18]

The next verse lists six character traits necessary for healthy church leaders. The first quality is the term *philoxenon*, or 'loving the stranger.' It is the opposite of another Greek word you probably know, *xenophobia*. Loving the stranger means being a friend to foreigners; to reach out, welcome, and love people who are different than we are. They may speak different languages, wear different clothes, and have various appearances, preferences, habits, and cultures. The first sign of a good pastor – and Christian in general – is that we welcome and love immigrants, refugees, and other diverse people.

The next trait is *philagathon*, translated as "lover of goodness," which is a Greek word only used once in the Bible. It means someone who loves whom and what God loves, as the Creator of good. It is different and more profound than the more often-used term used in the Bible for goodness, *kalos*, which describes a surface type of beauty. The third character trait is *sophrona*, a kind of self-control that focuses on the self-awareness, sensibility, balance, and wisdom needed to be a trustworthy leader. This is the opposite of a controlling, spiritually abusive pastor. Next on the list is *dikaion*, which describes someone aligned "right up" to God's justice and righteousness. The fifth Greek word is *hosion*, expressing reverence and devotion to God's truth and love. The final character trait Christian leaders are to embody is *enkrate*. This is the same word translated as "self-control" in the list of the fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5 and describes evidence that the Holy Spirit is strengthening our willpower beyond our human weaknesses.
With a deeper understanding of the five characteristics to avoid and six character traits to expect of church leaders, Paul moves from character to competence. Titus 1:9 states that clergy should be *"holding tightly to the trustworthy word of the teaching, so that he may be able both to*

[17] Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 5.
[18] Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 3.

exhort with sound instruction and to refute those who contradict it.".[19] That short list of two skills seems simple, compared to the five "don'ts" and six "do's" in the character requirements. These twin responsibilities are both exhorting and refuting those who are responsible for sharing the good news of Christ. The Greek word translated as "exhort" or "encourage" in most versions, *parakalein*, connotes being close-up and personal in a comforting way.[20] This is also a biblical name for the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, as a personification of this verb.

When clergy have the character traits as evidence of being trustworthy messengers of the Good News of Christ, they can encourage and correct those in their spiritual care. As with the adage to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," coined by the journalist Finley Peter Dunne (1867-1936), the final skill needed by church leaders is to be able to refute those who contradict the "trustworthy word of teaching." The Greek word translated as *refute* is from the word *elégxō* , which means "to convince with solid, compelling evidence, especially to expose."[21] Who is to be refuted? Those who *contradict* Christ's message. The Greek meaning of *antilegó* describes those who are argumentatively voicing opposition.[22]

The Church needs good shepherds who, like Jesus the Good Shepherd, will simultaneously feed and protect the flock. This involves more than a didactic teaching of truth but being a living reflection of grace and truth that leads to faith, hope, and love. As Jesus warned, some shepherds refuse to comprehend or accept their needs and God's gift of grace. Like wolves, they divide, scatter, and devour the flock. A wise shepherd (spiritual overseer) knows how to recognize danger and deception and protect the sheep (the church), all while ensuring that they are modeling grace and truth for those learning to live by grace through faith.[23]

Not only do churches need healthy and accountable leaders, but the not-yet-believing world needs to trust the church leaders and congregation(s) before they will cautiously come to church and trust in Christ. The Apostle Paul knew that healthy boundaries and integrity are the first step in church leadership and effective evangelism. The life and message of Christ is entirely trustworthy. God calls church leaders to live trustworthy lives and be agents of salvific healing and trust. This allows for the seed of trusting faith to be nurtured and developed in the hearts of God's children in Crete and all ages, cultures, and ethnicities.

As evidenced about two thousand years ago by the Apostle Paul's directions to Titus, church leaders must have their character and competency assessed for integrity to safeguard the mission and witness of Christ's church. Emotional and spiritual maturity is essential for clergy to successfully manage life and ministry's stresses. Without healthy humility and pastoral boundaries, even well-intentioned pastors' spiritual- and self-disciplines can quickly

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[19] Titus 1:9 (NRSV)
[20] "Strong's Greek: 3870," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/3870.htm.
[21] "Strong's Greek: 1651," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/1651.htm.
[22] "Strong's Greek: 483," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/483.htm.
[23] Bray, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 485-6.

erode. In such a weakened state, there is a propensity for clergy to spiritually harm those they are called to gently lead and spiritually feed.

Over a decade ago, I took a week-long intensive class at a mega-church. We were all Master of Divinity students, hoping to learn how to become rock star pastors who grow big churches and publish books and videos that change thousands of lives. At the beginning of the week, the famous senior pastor wanted to learn about our backgrounds. One of my friends, a former newspaper editor who answered the call to ministry in his fifties, was pushed by the senior pastor to admit he was in his third marriage. I knew my friend had been abused in his previous marriages, and it was not a reflection of his character. The mega-church pastor revealed his flawed character, by saying "You're on your third marriage? You're a Jacka$$!" Thinking he was being funny, he called my friend by that derogatory name dozens of times that week instead of his real name. The main thing I learned from that class was that I never want to become a megachurch pastor if it makes me into a monster who mistreats people, especially those who have already suffered.

Not only do churches need healthy and accountable leaders, but the not-yet-believing world needs to trust the church leaders and congregation(s) before they can put their trust in Christ. The Apostle Paul insisted that people whose metaphorical wheels fall off were to be disqualified from being pastors. It is time again to recommit to the kind of pastoral character and competency necessary for healthy church leadership and effective evangelism. The life and message of Christ is entirely trustworthy. God calls church leaders to live trustworthy lives as agents of God's healing and trust. This allows for the seed of trusting faith to be nurtured, grown, and become fruitful in the lives of God's children. Let us pray this Profession of Blessing for ourselves and others who are recommitting to keep evil out and goodness in.

A Blessing for When You Are Tired of Broken Systems, by Kate Bowler

Oh God, I am done with broken systems that break the very people they are meant to serve.
Harness this anger. Channel it into worthy action and show me what is mine to fix
and what boundaries to patrol to keep goodness in and evil out.
Blessed are we who are appalled that brute ignorance can so easily dominate
over decency, honesty, and integrity.
Blessed are we, who choose not to look away from systems
that dehumanize, deceive, defame, and distort.
We who recognize that thoughts and prayers are not enough.
We who stand with truth over expediency, principle over politics,
community over competition.
Oh God, how blessed are we who cry out to you:
empower us to see and name what is broken, what is ours to restore,
guide us to find coherent and beautiful alternatives
that foster life, hope, and peace.
Help us use our gifts with one another in unity.
Blessed are we who choose to live in anticipation,
our eyes scanning the horizon, for signs of your kingdom—
heaven-come-down— as we wait in hope and act with courage.[24]

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you look for to determine whether and to what extent you can trust a pastor?
2. What suggestions to you have for credentialing and hiring pastors to reduce the risks of clergy abuse of power?
3. What question related to *Clergy Character and Competency* do you wish you were asked that you would like to answer?

[24] https://katebowler.com/blessings/a-blessing-for-when-youre-tired-of-broken-systems-2/ Used with permission.

Forgiveness has wildly different interpretations and innately tricky applications. There are legal, therapeutic, and theological approaches to forgiveness. A legal understanding of forgiveness focuses on granting relief from a debt that is owed, such as student loan forgiveness or bankruptcy. Therapy emphasizes the emotional aspects of forgiveness, specifically releasing negative feelings of resentment and retribution toward an offender. Our spiritual understanding of forgiveness may not be as accurate as we assume. The Bible insists that God alone can ultimately forgive - "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"[25], yet also demands that individuals must forgive others if they want to be forgiven by God - "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."[26].

Part of the problem has come from many people, including pastors, who have twisted the understanding of forgiveness. I suspect most have simply perpetuated common misunderstandings based on linguistic and cultural convenience. But there have also been spiritually abusive pastors who have distorted forgiveness to protect and benefit themselves. They may have insisted that they should be unconditionally pardoned, forgiven, reconciled, and allowed to keep the position and power they feel entitled to. For this and many other reasons, I believe it is time to rethink forgiveness.

[25] Mark 2:7b.
[26] Matthew 6:14-15.

Forgiveness is a deeply personal and theological challenge for people spiritually harmed by a pastor. Not only is there an understandable distrust toward the pastor who wounded them, but also an extension of that suspicion toward other clergy, congregations, and Christians. To complicate matters, much of what is taught about forgiveness in churches and society is theologically weak. The person harmed often feels stripped of the ability to be safe or seek justice when they are misinformed about forgiveness. Others struggle to forgive based on striving to act and feel in a certain way. Both scenarios result in a spiritual infection being allowed to fester, individually and in the church.

When I read some well-regarded theological resources about forgiveness, I was disappointed if not appalled. For instance, the Anchor-Yale Bible Dictionary says, "Forgiveness is the wiping out of an offense from memory; it can be affected only by the one affronted. Once eradicated, the offense no longer conditions the relationship between the offender and the one affronted, and harmony is restored between the two."[27] This suggests forgetfulness and reconciliation as expected outcomes of forgiveness, and we will soon learn why that is not helpful or true. The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms defines forgiveness as "Pardoning or remitting an offense. It restores a good relationship with God, others, or the self after sin or alienation."[28] This dangerously assumes forgiveness restores the relationship not only with God but with the offender. The *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* envisions forgiveness as more esoteric than realistic, describing it as "A dynamic, social-psychological experience of being released from the deleterious effects of guilt and sinful behavior and restoring broken relations between human beings and God and among themselves."[29] To summarize those and other typical definitions, I have listed six beliefs about forgiveness that we must rethink. Please raise your hand after I say each different assumption about forgiveness that you have ever heard or said (whether or not you believe it to be true):

8. To forgive is to forget and never bring it up again.
9. To forgive someone means pardoning or overlooking their behavior.
10. If I forgive someone, they will not face consequences for the harm they caused.
11. The evidence of forgiveness is reconciliation.
12. If I want God to forgive me, I must forgive people who hurt me.
13. If I forgive someone who hurt me, I will no longer feel the pain of that harm.

Though there could be a kernel of truth in each of these understandings about forgiveness, these assumptions are emotionally, physically, spiritually, and theologically dangerous. Misconceptions about forgiveness can knot up people's souls. Therefore, we will gently

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[27] John S. Kselman, James H. Charlesworth, and Gary S. Shogren, "Forgiveness," *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary: D–G*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 831-8, http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780300261882-627.
[28] Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, Second Edition: Revised and Expanded* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 107.
[29] Joel B. Green, Jeannine K Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* 2nd ed. IVP Bible Dictionary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 695.

examine and attempt to untangle the unhelpful assumptions described in the list above. The first statement, "to forgive is to forget and never bring it up again" is based on passages such as "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more,"[30] "I alone am the one who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins,"[31] and "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."[32] These scriptural examples describe God's acts of mercy and forgiveness. They do not lead to a divine expectation of human forgiveness and "forgetting." How could we revise our understanding of forgiveness as forgetting and/or condoning? Dr. Jessica Shultz sagely advises, "Forgiveness must also be set apart from forgetting. Whereas forgetting eliminates the experience from memory, forgiveness focuses on reframing one's responses to an offense rather than eliminating the experience of the offense from consciousness."[33]

In John 8, the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus in front of a crowd. They tested Jesus to see if he would advocate for stoning her as the law dictated or if Jesus would overlook her sin. He turned it around and told the crowd, "[L]et the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!"[34]. They each remembered ways they had sinned as they laid down their stones and left. "Then Jesus stood up again and asked the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" "No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."[35] The others realized they could not condemn her as they recalled how they had each sinned and had been divinely, if not also humanly, forgiven. They had to remember their own sin to be able to forgive the sin of another.

When we assume that "forgetting" sin erases our memory of the sin, or at least a commitment never to speak of it again, it could temporarily ease the painful memories of when, how, and who wounded another. However, it is questionable whether that is a wise way to address sin, whether our own or another's. Hebrews 8:12, quotes God saying, "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."[36] The Greek word translated as 'remember' is *mimnesko*, which implies an active, purposeful recall.[37] It describes a perseverating memory, a rumination that widens and deepens the initial damage caused by sin. God does not expect or want us to forget how we have sinned, or others have sinned against us, but desires that we are released from our ruminations through forgiveness. **Forgiveness is not forgetfulness, but choosing to reframe our responses instead of ruminating.**

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[30] Jeremiah 31:34.
[31] Isaiah 43:25.
[32] Hebrews 8:12.
[33] Jessica M. Schultz, *Does Forgiveness Matter? A Study of Spiritual Transformation among Survivors of Significant Interpersonal Offenses* (PhD dissertation, University of Iowa, 2011), 28. DOI: 10.17077/etd.mm3ayya7.
[34] John 8:7, NRSV.
[35] John 8:10-11, NRSV.
[36] Hebrews 8:12, NRSV.
[37] "Hebrews 8-12 Greek Text Analysis," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/text/hebrews/8-12.htm.

Just as forgiveness does not mean forgetting, it also does not mean overlooking sin. Jesus, the only sinless one, could have condemned the woman caught in adultery but chose to demonstrate forgiveness with boundaries. Yes, he released her from the condemnation of her sin with the word "Go…," but he also continued, "…and sin no more."[38] The woman (and, by implication, all of humanity) was not set free so that she could continue in sinning against God and others. Jesus was not overlooking, excusing, or condoning her (or any of our) offenses. Likewise, humans should not ignore, compare, or justify our sin or others'. **Forgiveness does not excuse or condone sin, but is conditional and insists on positive change.**

The third theological truth is that forgiveness does not truncate justice and is not free of consequences. This confronts the veracity of the third statement, "If I forgive someone, then they will not face consequences for the harm they caused." There is a conflict that seems to arise between attempting to forgive and seeking justice. Do we need to let go of a need for justice in order to forgive? Not at all! Hasty forgiveness often ends up colluding with harm, and complicit silence rather than speaking out evil and injustice. This results in further harm, both for the one who was initially hurt as well as for others who might be harmed in the future if the abuser is not stopped.[39] **Forgiveness does not give people a pass, but insists on justice and accountability.**

A fourth way of rethinking forgiveness is that it does not necessarily lead to restoring or reconciling a damaged relationship. This truth counters the common belief that reconciliation is evidence of forgiveness. In situations where a person has been harmed by someone they do not know; how could a non-existent relationship be reconciled? Is it always or ever possible to turn back the clock to "Before Harm" and avoid the natural and relational consequences? Dr. Daniel Treier says, "Restored relationships— even with God— may not undo the consequences of our actions. God— and even human victims— may forgive a sin such as drunk driving while the perpetrator rightly lands in prison….[F]orms of reconciliation depend on repentance.."[40] In something called *unilateral forgiveness*, a wrongdoer has not repented but the victim has nevertheless forgiven. Assuming the abuser is still alive, despite not being troubled or convicted about the harm they caused, there cannot be an appropriate path of reconciliation. In the early church, asking for forgiveness was marked by "silence, sorrow, tears of mourning, and fasting."[41] The necessity of not only apologetic words but actions of repentance were necessary requisites for forgiveness. This was a big contrast to "the traditional Greco-Roman idea of *sungnōmē,* which depended…on one's ability to excuse one's act or shift blame."[42] These actions of excusing, justifying, and shifting blame are the

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[38] John 8:11, NRSV.
[39] Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics*, 172
[40] Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Evangelical Theology* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 171-173.
[41] Daniel R. Driver, "Forgiveness," In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2014), https://www-oxfordreference-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref:obso/9780199858699.001.0001/acref-9780199858699-e-81.
[42] Driver, "Forgiveness."

same dark tactics of Impression Management that we recently learned about. **Forgiveness should <u>not</u> include reconciliation when the wrongdoer does not show genuine repentance.** However, the one who was harmed and extended forgiveness (with appropriate distance) can experience reconciliation with God internally.[43]

The fifth concern about forgiveness is regarding the victim's responsibilities in forgiving, whether there are conditions placed on the abuser, and whether God's forgiveness of us is predicated on our forgiveness of others. Jesus' warning in his Sermon on the Mount is easily misunderstood: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."[44] These two verses follow immediately after Jesus taught the crowds how to pray what we now call the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is a primer on establishing a relationship with God that leads to a new way of relating to one another. Though on the surface it seems to say that God will not forgive us unless we forgive those who have hurt us, there are better ways of looking at it. Martin Luther emphasized that "interpersonal forgiveness is not a requirement but evidence of divine forgiveness." Likewise, John Calvin interpreted forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer more as "an assurance of forgiveness more than a command."[45] Long before both Luther and Calvin, Cyril of Alexandria did not see the Lord's Prayer model of forgiveness as *quid pro quo* but as meaning, "Forgive us in the same way we do when we forgive."[46] **Interpersonal forgiveness is not a command, but evidence of divine forgiveness. It is an assurance that we are forgiven in the same way that we forgive others.**

A final issue to address is the claim if we have forgiven someone, that we will no longer feel the pain of the harm. Forgiveness is not based on human feelings. Though forgiving may ease some of the pain of the harm someone caused, the wounds can cause emotional, spiritual, and physical repercussions, often felt in varying intensities and times, even (and especially) throughout the long journey of intentional forgiveness. As Brad Fipps asserts, "While we begin the process of forgiveness by consciously forgiving the wrongdoer, the hurt, pain, and suffering we have experienced may continue to be felt. [and certainly remembered].[47] **Forgiving is not based on our feelings. The journey of forgiveness is similar to grief, with waves of complex emotions complicated by time and decisions.**

Our challenge in understanding and practicing forgiveness originates in an imperfect recognition and acceptance of God's mercy and forgiveness in our lives. Any echo of God's forgiveness will be distorted where our broken humanity is present. Miroslav Volf eloquently summarizes, "Our forgiving is faulty; God's is faultless…We forgive tenuously and

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[43] Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics*, 172.
[44] Matthew 6:14-15, NRSV.
[45] Mayo, *Limits of Forgiveness*, 116.
[46] Mayo, *Limits of Forgiveness*, 117.
[47] Fipps, 107.

tentatively; God forgives unhesitatingly and definitively."[48] This reality is not to be used as an excuse not to forgive but as an inspiration to appreciate how we have been forgiven more deeply so that we can forgive others with truth and justice. Let us pray a Profession of Blessing on behalf of those who have been harmed and struggle to know if and how to forgive.

When Someone Has Done You Harm[49] by Kate Bowler

God, there is a long list of possible terrors crowding every newspaper.
But there is a kind of terror, Lord, for which I am unprepared. Somone cannot be trusted.
A spiritual world of forgive, forgive, forgive made me a lamb.
I learned to take down every fence that kept me from harm. I needed barbed wire, not lions left to graze.
I might have been angry if I thought it was permitted. I might have been wary if I had allowed myself to take note.
How was I? Nervous, queasy, worried, and, worst of all, quieted with a misplaced shame.
Lord, restore in me a deep, immovable trust that I have language for evil – those behaviors, intentions, and even institutions that are willfully determined to engineer my harm.
You have my eyes – now help me see. Make me nimble in discernment and ruthless in truth.
Whatever and whoever seeks to tarnish and gaslight, tear down and consume for its own purposes, let it be dragged into the great bonfire that is your light.
I am a lamb, yes. But you are the great shepherd who promised something so strange. When you see the flock crowded together, safe, and snug, -except one, except me – you will not rest. You will rescue me.

Discussion Questions:

1. What have been your assumptions about forgiveness?
2. Are you rethinking any particular ideas about what forgiveness means now?
3. What question related to *Rethinking Forgiveness* do you wish you were asked and would like to answer?

[48] Volf, *Free of Charge*, 220.
[49] Bowler, Kate, Have A Beautiful Terrible Day! (Convergent Books: New York, 2024), 39. Used with permission.

William Arthur Ward said, “Forgiveness is a funny thing. It warms the heart and cools the sting.” However, it does not come as effortlessly as it sounds. People who a pastor has hurt have unique and complicated challenges regarding forgiveness. They are often left disoriented from the reality of both the nature of the abuse and what forgiveness means. Because forgiveness is frequently twisted and misrepresented, we all need to rethink forgiveness in a more biblically accurate way. If you missed last week when we explored common misunderstandings about forgiveness, please read that first part. Today is the second half, which focuses on how we see forgiveness as a release from the pain of abuse and related pressures weighing down our souls.

The pressure to forgive needs to be lifted and released. People who have been hurt are often told it is their “Christian duty” to forgive someone who harmed them, even if there are little or no signs of repentance. Sometimes, people are told a false dichotomy of choosing forgiveness and reconciliation or anger and resentment. Are those the only choices? When pastors and people misinterpret the nature of forgiveness, it creates a kind of pressure to forgive in false ways that is an additional form of spiritual abuse. Their desire to use forgiveness as the magic pill to fix the problem only masks it. It signals that the pastor’s needs and inadequacies are prioritized over the well-being of those harmed. When people are told that forgiveness and reconciliation are required for their healing and well-being, it often sets them up for further abuse that is cloaked in religious language. An example is when pastors advise victims of domestic violence to “forgive” and reconcile with someone who is still (and often will always be) a threat. Releasing the pressure to forgive restores the free will to choose whether and how to forgive.

We must approach forgiveness with sensitivity toward those who have been harmed. Mayo states, “suggesting that victims are morally obligated to forgive and portraying nonforgiving

victims as vengeful and hate-filled serves only to amplify the offense they already suffer."[50] Likewise, such one-sided expectations of forgiveness create "a constant pressure to forgive…[which] marginalize[s] victims who are unable or unwilling to forgive those who tortured them, terrorized them, and murdered their loved ones."[51] Mayo continues, "While I would argue that victims may not be obligated to forgive when certain conditions are not met, the question remains: Must the victim forgive when the offender has satisfied every requirement?"[52]

Though forgiveness as an ideal is well-intentioned, Mayo explains three problematic areas: First, biblical forgiveness is equated with one-sided, unconditional forgiveness. Second, the requirement for repentance is lost. Third, forgiveness is defined as a psychological and emotional feat accomplished by the victim, regardless of whether the offender is present or shows remorse. How can we release these problematic approaches to forgiveness? By learning how forgiveness is literally "release"!

Jesus' parable in Matthew 18:21-35 reveals a helpful understanding of "releasing" in the context of forgiveness. When the king was settling accounts with his servant managers, one was found to owe ten thousand talents, worth about $35 billion in today's money. Initially, the king ordered that the servant, his wife, and children be sold, along with all their possessions. Any funds raised and returned to the king would have been minuscule compared to the debt owed. The servant pleaded with the king, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."[53] Consider the math – even if the servant manager earned the equivalent of $100,000 a year and turned over 100% of his paycheck to pay off his debt, it would take 350,000 years to pay back 35 billion dollars, not including interest. That does not require a patient king but a forgiving king. "Out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt."[54]

Examining the Greek words translated as "released" and "forgave" illuminates our understanding and application of forgiveness. It is sometimes imagined that the servant in the parable was held captive by the king as he begged for mercy, but that is not part of the story. The original word for "release" is *apolýō* in Greek, a combination of *apo* (away from) and *lyo* (to loosen, release).[55] It means letting go, releasing, discharging, divorcing, or dismissing. It implies an annulment of an existing bond, which is the same word Matthew used in the next chapter (19), where Jesus taught about divorce ("releasing" the spouse). The man in Jesus' parable who failed at his job was being "released" or, in our vocabulary, getting fired. Sometimes, "releasing" someone means putting a safe distance between you and them, whether physically, emotionally, financially, or any combination. This is not usually how people imagine grace or forgiveness, but our theological imagination needs to be expanded. In this parable, grace is demonstrated first by "releasing" (firing) the servant and then by forgiving the financial debt.

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[50] Mayo, *Limits of Forgiveness*, 93.
[51] Mayo, *Limits of Forgiveness*, 107.
[52] Mayo, *Limits of Forgiveness*, 79.
[53] Matthew 18:26, NRSV.
[54] Matthew 18:27, NRSV.
[55] "Strong's Greek: 630," BibleHub, https://biblehub.com/greek/630.htm.

We often assume that such releasing is the opposite of forgiving. However, the Greek word Jesus used to "forgive" the debt is *aphiemi*, from the words *apo* ("away from") and *hiemi* ("send"), which is synonymous with *apolyo. Aphiemi* has several meanings: to send away, let go, cancel, leave, discharge, remit, and forgive.[56] This warrants a re-examination of many assumptions regarding forgiveness and how to forgive. Perhaps giving and receiving forgiveness between humans could be more accurately described as extending and receiving grace with the wisdom of healthy boundaries.

Forgiving someone does not mean a person must trust or be reconciled with someone who harmed them, even if there are indications of repentance. It is usually wise to forgive at a safe distance, especially initially. People often need to protect themselves and others in their care by avoiding toxic situations and distancing the people who cause them. Forgiving sometimes means that people release their expectations for others to be able to make it right with them. When a person forgives someone, the forgiven are still held accountable by God and society for their actions. Rather than contributing to a cycle of debt and revenge, forgiveness can create a new movement of accountable community and responsible grace.

One frequently overlooked characteristic of forgiveness is that it is primarily intended for the benefit of the forgiver, regardless of the initiation or response of the forgiven. A person cannot receive true forgiveness without repentance - a contrite turning of attitudes and behaviors from that which has harmed toward that which demonstrates trustworthiness. Think of Christ on the cross as a guide for forgiving someone. Jesus's plea from the cross, "Father, forgive them,"[57] exemplified how Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of all who crucified him, including religious and political leaders and everyday people who preferred to release the notorious Barabbas. He does not directly forgive them but turns the matter over to God.[58] Jesus did not tell the crowd, "I forgive you! You don't know what you're doing."[59] In addition, Maria Mayo adds, "Jesus does not say, 'Father, forgive them because they are insecure and self-centered,' or 'Father, forgive them so I will not be locked into victimhood.' In such readings, the prayer of Jesus is transformed into an act of unconditional forgiveness to fit current models of offense as psychologically understandable and forgiveness as the key therapeutic response."[60] Jesus could have unilaterally forgiven the crowd that made false accusations and cheered his death. Instead, he chose to turn the business of forgiveness over to his Father. This example shows how we, like Christ, can turn the heavy lifting of forgiveness over to God. When the pain is too intense or the person who hurt us is still a threat, we can take a biblical step of faith to release them into God's hands of justice and grace and pray, "Father, forgive them".

The story of how Jesus handled forgiveness does not end there. Five verses later, there is a shift from working out forgiveness toward those who crucified him to the two other men crucified alongside him. The unrepentant criminal "kept deriding him, saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'"[61] The other criminal expressed remorse for his sin and

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[56] Verlyn Verbrugge, ed, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Abridged Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2003), 80.
[57] Luke 23:34a NRSV.
[58] Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness*, 6.
[59] Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness*, 170.
[60] Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness*, 184.
[61] Luke 23:39.

recognition of Christ's innocence: "But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he added, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."[62] Both the repentant and unrepentant sinners faced the earthly consequences of their transgressions, but Christ only gave the repentant sinner the promise of eternal salvation and implied forgiveness. Victims of spiritual abuse are often expected to respond with forgiveness to an apology from their pastoral abuser. Perhaps the abusive person has been convicted, humbled, and seeks to make amends. Dr. Wade Mullen, author of *Something's Not Right*, outlines five guidelines to determine whether an apology is genuine or deceptive, whether they are a pastor, family member, or stranger. Using the anacronym "SCORE," a victim of spiritual or any other kind of abuse can use this as a helpful tool to aid in discerning if and how to forgive and possibly begin the long path of reconciliation.[63]

> S – Surrender. Is the abuser (and those complicit in the abuse) laying down their defensiveness? Are they willing to walk away from any further denials and deflections? Are they willing to be specific rather than vague in who they are apologizing to and for what reasons?[64]
> C—Confession. Are they accurately naming the wrong(s) done? Are they confessing to both known abuse and that which they managed to keep hidden? A truly repentant person often makes confessions for as much or more as others are aware of. This usually requires the willingness to submit to further investigation so that the confession is not short-changed and unfulfilled.[65]
> O – Ownership. Rather than accepting a passive apology that avoids unflattering exposure, look for an apology that takes full responsibility for the harm done and is willing to accept any consequences for that harm.[66]
> R- Recognition. Not only do the wrongs need to be identified by the abuser, but the specific ways those wrongs harmed someone also need to be recognized and articulated. The scope of abuse and the guilt of the abuser is laid bare. [67]
> E – Empathy. When facing the ugly reality of how their abuse has harmed someone, a truly repentant person will carry an empathic burden. In their brokenness, they will desire to work at offering restitution and restoring trust.[68]

The process of rebuilding trust is characterized by many phases, often jumbled and complicated by a need to re-align our spiritual compass after it had been demagnetized through religious trauma. The related deceitful tactics of Impression Management and unhelpful assumptions about forgiveness only continue to prevent or erode trust. Misusing forgiveness lays a heavy burden on victims of abuse. Instead of assuming that direct forgiveness is the ultimate response to wrongdoing, pity and prayer that turn people and the pain they cause over to God may be more appropriate.[69]

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[62] Luke 23:40-43.
[63] Mullen, *Something's Not Right*, 143.
[64] Mullen, *Something's Not Right*, 143-4.
[65] Mullen, *Something's Not Right*, 144-146.
[66] Mullen, *Something's Not Right*, 146.
[67] Mullen, *Something's Not Right*, 147.
[68] Mullen, *Something's Not Right*, 147.
[69] Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness,* 174.

As a church, we can release the pressure to forgive in misguided ways.[70] The truth must be fully revealed, the abuser must honestly repent, and accountability must be evident before direct forgiveness should be explored as an option. Let us pray for ourselves and others who seek God's wisdom to know how to "release" someone who has harmed us….

"When Loving Your Enemy Seems Too Big of an Ask"[71] by Kate Bowler

Lord, this anger feels so right, so just, that it feels inconceivable that I could love my enemy. Am I even allowed to have an enemy? Well, too bad. I do.

God, I don't want to but help me see what I need to see, so I can do what I know I'm supposed to do. God have mercy. Christ have mercy. Spirit have mercy.

Blessed are we who recognize that the divide is very deep, and the enmity strong.
We are attached now to our hostilities, not only as symbols of who we are, but also in the specific values and principles that we uphold.

Blessed are we who ask you God: help us to be faithful to Your commandment to love our enemies, for Your Name's sake and for ours too. Yet we ask, how is that possible?

We desire no false peace, no imitation grace. Honestly, God, where do we start?
How do we recover civility? Build unity?
Work together and yet hold on to our integrity?

Show us precisely how to love those whom we have so lately despised. Not just humanity in general, but humans, in particular.

Blessed are we who say, O God, please do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.
Give us the desire to speak the truth in love,
to listen to each other and hear the humanity underneath the hurt.

Give us the wisdom and skills to communicate well and patience that can bear up when things get difficult. And where we ourselves fall short, stand in the gap for us Lord, just as you did at the cross.

Pray for one enemy. Do them some small good. Then let it go.

God have mercy. Christ have mercy. Spirit have mercy.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you seen forgiveness used in an unhelpful way? Please share an example.
2. What aspects of forgiveness are most spiritually or emotionally difficult?
3. What question related to *Releasing Forgiveness* do you wish you were asked and would like to answer?

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[70] Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness*, 164.
[71] https://katebowler.com/blessings/a-blessing-for-when-loving-your-enemy-seems-too-big-of-an-ask/ Used with permission.

Before I became a pastor, I was a pastor's wife for many years. Unfortunately, my former husband was spiritually manipulative and left a trail of tears at every church he served. He tried to convince me that if I fervently prayed for him for several hours every day, then we would see each church he served become bigger and stronger instead of falling apart. Even though I believed in the power of prayer, this assumption was problematic for a few reasons. First, in order to devote all of his time to reading, praying, and preaching, he demanded that I take full responsibility for caring for our three young children, the house, the yard, shopping, cooking, cleaning, and working odd jobs to pay the bills each time he was let go from a church. Due to his instability, we moved ten times in eight states during the first fourteen years of our marriage. I was too exhausted and disoriented for long prayers.

Over the years, I came to realize that he was misusing prayer to spiritually manipulate me and the churches he served. Abusive pastors often twist prayer, whether through passive-aggressive methods or demanding specific methods of praying that impose a heavy or unrealistic burden on people. But there is hope. We can work towards reestablishing trust in clergy after those without necessary spiritual integrity and maturity have harmed a congregation. It's a journey, but it's a journey we can take together.

We can find ways to move toward a healthier future by rediscovering our history. Admittedly, a couple of passages from 2 Chronicles 15 probably raised a few eyebrows. Those can be interpreted with grace from the context. The prophet Azariah said to King Asa, and all of the tribes of Benjamin and Judah*, "The Lord is with you, while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you."* (v. 2). These words inspired the people to repent of trying to follow their misguided ways. *"In their distress they turned to the Lord and sought him, he was found by them."* (v. 4). They were told, "*Take courage! Do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded."* (v. 7). With those words of encouragement, King Asa gathered all the people. *"They entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their ancestors, with*

all their heart and with all their soul." (v. 12). As a result, "*All Judah rejoiced over the oath; for they had sworn with all their heart, and had sought him with their whole desire, and he was found by them, and the Lord gave them rest all around."* (v. 15)

Despite some disturbing verses sprinkled in, John Wesley found this passage profoundly inspiring and transforming. John and his brother Charles are known for effectively and efficiently inspiring and organizing a church renewal movement called Methodism. John was an eighteenth-century version of Titus on an even larger island, Britain. Though the Church of England was well-established, it had lost much credibility through both complacency and corruption of its clergy. England was on its way to becoming like a pre-Christian "Crete."

One enduring example of healing and transformation can be found in the Covenant Renewal Service, which was inspired by 2 Chronicles 15. John Wesley drew on the theology of covenant and the tradition of the Puritans. He then adapted their personal devotional practice into a congregational opportunity to rebuild faith and strengthen their trust in God. It is a service and prayer with a long tradition of eliciting humility, healing, and renewal. As generations have prayed and renewed their covenant and trust in God, they have found healing from personal and congregational blindness and betrayals to renew the covenantal community. What is now called Wesley's Covenant Prayer is a synthesis of the overall service of praying to renew a relationship with God characterized by humility, reverence, and grace. It has the potential to continue a tradition of transforming and healing souls and societies harmed by spiritual and other types of abuse. So be it now as then.

John Wesley was deeply inspired by a Puritan preacher named Richard Alleine, who lived from 1611-1681, a hundred years before John. John used Alleine's book *Vindicae Pietatis* as the basis for the Covenant Renewal Service. *Vindicae Pietatis* bears a verbose subtitle: "A Vindication of Godliness, In the Greatest Strictness and Spirituality of it, From the Imputations of Folly and Fancy, Together with Several Directions for the Attaining and Maintaining of a Godly Life." For those who know John Wesley's personality, we quickly see why he was so attracted to it. He was dedicated to developing leaders and preachers with godly character and a high degree of competence in their calling. For those who have experienced religious trauma, the "Imputations of Folly and Fancy" are often initial signs of spiritually abusive clergy.

Consider these lines from Alleine's *Vindicae Pietatis,* commonly attributed as Wesley's Covenant Prayer*:*

> I will be no longer mine own but give my self up to thy will in all things…[72]
> Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt,
> Put me to doing, put me to suffering,
> Let me be imployed [sic] for thee, or laid aside for thee,
> Exalted for thee, or trodden under foot for thee,
> Let me be full, let me be empty,
> Let me have all things, let me have nothing,

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[72] Richard Alleine, (1611-1681), *Vindicae Pietatis: or, a vindication of godliness, in the greatest strictness and spirituality of it. From the imputations of folly and fancy Together with several directions for the attaining and maintaining of a godly life* (London, UK, printed in 1665. Ann Arbor, MI: Text Creation Partnership, 2011), 198.

> I freely and heartily resign all to thy pleasure and disposal….[73]
> O dreadful Jehovah, the Lord God omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
> Thou art now become my Covenant friend, and I through thine infinite Grace,
> am become thy Covenant-servant, Amen, So be it:
> And the Covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in Heaven."[74]

The legacy of Richard Alleine's *Vindicae Pietatis* could be considered a miracle. The four-hundred-page volume was initially refused to be licensed and published by Archbishop Sheldon in 1660. In true non-conformist fashion, it was published without official authority, copies sold quickly, and a late nineteenth-century historian tells a fascinating story:

> "[It] did much to mend this bad world. Roger Norton, the royal printer, caused a large portion of the first edition to be seized on the ground of its not being licensed, and to be sent to the royal kitchen [*to be burned in the cooking fires*]. But glancing over its pages he was arrested by what he read, and on second thoughts it seemed to him a sin that a book so holy and so saleable should be killed. He therefore bought back the sheets, says Calamy, for an old song, bound them, and sold them in his own shop. This in turn was complained of, and the shrewd publisher had to beg pardon on his knees at the council-table. The remaining copies were further sentenced to be 'bisked' or rubbed over with an inky brush, and sent back to the palace kitchen for lighting fires. Even in the palace there must have been worthy traitors, for 'bisked' copies occasionally turn up still."[75]

One cannot help but see the similarities between Alleine's book and John Wesley's defining childhood moment. *Vindicae Pietatis* was rescued from the fires of the castle kitchen and later used to transform souls and societies for centuries to come. John Wesley's mother, Susanna, called him "a brand plucked from the fire" after he was miraculously rescued from their burning parsonage in Epworth. Like the book, John Wesley was used to light souls on fire across the ages and borders.

It could be said that *Vindicae Pietatis* was rescued again nearly a century after it was first printed when John Wesley adapted its texts for the first Covenant Renewal Service on Monday, August 11, 1755. His journal details:

> "At six in the evening, we met for that purpose at the French Church in Spitalfields. After I had recited the tenor of the covenant proposed, in the words of that blessed man, Richard Alleine, all the people stood up in testimony of assent, to the number of about eighteen hundred persons. Such a night I scarce ever saw before. Surely the fruit of it shall remain forever."[76]

Despite John Wesley's preference for exactness in his words and plans, there was no strict script for the Covenant Renewal Service. He usually opened it with a hymn and a prayer, read Richard Alleine's five "Directions' to explain the purpose and process of covenanting with God, invited people to stand, raise their hands, or both to signify their acceptance of the covenant, and closed with a prayer, communion, and singing a hymn. In 1762, John's brother,

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[73] Alleine, *Vindicae Pietatis*, 199.
[74] Alleine, *Vindicae Pietatis*, 208.
[75] "Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900/Alleine, Richard," Wikisource. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/DictionaryofNationalBiography,1885-1900/Alleine,Richard.
[76] Wesley, *The Works*, 23.

Charles Wesley, wrote the hymn *'Come, Let Us Use the Grace Divine'* based on Jeremiah 1:5: "Come and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten." It became known as "The Covenant Hymn" and has been associated with and sung at Covenant Renewal Services ever since.[77]

Richard Alleine likely intended *Vindicae Pietatis* solely as a devotional reading and guide for individual prayer. In contrast, John Wesley moved it from the privacy of a prayer closet to the collective rebuilding of the church community. Wesley brought it past a personal covenantal practice and even beyond the re-commitment of a particular parish and place to God. Inviting dozens of societies to come together in exceptionally large gatherings, these special Covenant Renewal Services were indeed a "connexional" event. "The genius of Wesley's service was that it preserved a method of personal covenanting for individuals…and at the same time fused this personal dedication into a congregational rite."[78]

This historic service has been adjusted many times to a changing world and has the potential to continue a tradition of transforming and healing souls and societies. It can also be adapted to help restore healthy trust after pastoral betrayal. First, we are prepared by learning about pride and humility and surrendering one's will to God's will. As clergy and congregations learn to recognize and demonstrate healthy and godly servant leadership in themselves and others, they will better be able to confess ways they have and/or been deceived, betrayed, and harmed. Second, people can learn and see that even when their Christian leaders have been unfaithful and betrayed their pastoral charge, they can still affirm that God is faithful even when a pastor betrayed the faith. Related to this is effective teaching about healthy forgiveness and trust for others and ourselves. Finally, after preparing people by addressing some common problems and misconceptions that often lead to their vulnerability to narcissistic abuse, they can be offered an opportunity to begin the process of healing from the pain through the renewal of trust and commitment to God and working toward a healthier life of faith, both individually and congregationally.

As a caveat, professional therapy is essential for anyone deeply affected by spiritual abuse. However, a congregational-wide covenant prayer and worship service can be developed to help recover from and stop the cycle of spiritual abuse in the church. This initial variation of Wesley's Covenant Prayer is an invitation to continue a journey deeper into the possibilities of adapting a covenant renewal service for individuals and congregations needing healing from a blind – and blinding - shepherd. Let us pray together and pause between each line to take time to reflect and find our trust gently restored.

<u>Wesleyan Covenant Prayer, Adapted for Congregational Healing</u>

I am no longer my own or anyone else's, but yours.
Put me to no more and no less than what you will,
Place me with those whom I need to learn and heal humbly.
Put me to doing and succeeding; put me to suffering and struggling.
Let me be put to work on your behalf; set me aside while you work on me.
May I be kept humbled for you if I am recognized for you.
Let me be full of grace and healing; let me be emptied of shame and pride.
Let me have and be all things necessary to do your will.

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[77] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 217.
[78] Baker, "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service," 215.

Let me have or do nothing that would hinder your will.
I freely and fully surrender all I am and have to your glory and service.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
I belong to you and trust in you. So be it.
And this covenant made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

The Wesleyan Covenant Prayer is characterized by a posture of humility needed to expose, correct, and prevent the tactics of Impression Management. It is both an antidote and preventative spiritual prescription against the sickness of spiritual abuse. For victims trying to recover their ability to trust God, themselves, and other clergy, this prayer has the potential to overcome the evil of abuse with the good of knowing and trusting God's loving kindness. In addition, this practice of covenant prayer affirms that God is faithful and trustworthy, even when others are not or when we have difficulty determining when, who, and how to trust other pastors. As this prayer works through minds and rests gently in souls, there can be a renewal of commitment to God and trust in pastors and churches who demonstrate similar humility and faith.

I hope this series has given you tools to rebuild your trust wherever it has been broken. In whatever ways you have been hurt, my prayer is that you find renewed trust in God and a healthier church. If it helps, I can listen to any memories, thoughts, and feelings. I am here to support you through any incidents of spiritual abuse that may have resurfaced during this series. If there are parts of this series that have been especially meaningful, or even if there are aspects that did not seem to connect, I am eager to hear and learn from you. Thank you for the privilege of listening and even trusting me. With 176 years of history, our congregation has experienced many joys and pains. May we recommit to praying and trusting as we move closer to Christ. Please join in this responsive blessing:

"Blessing for Living Without Control"[79] by Kate Bowler

God, I come to you as I am. It is all I have, really. And the next one I'm conscious of will be the same. I can feel the way I move, moment to moment, without the comfort of "solutions."

It seems wild to me now how I imagined any once-and-for-all cure for this, or a master plan to ensure things will work out. But, truth be told, that's always been my secret hope.

So, Lord, let's try again. I'm begging for a new plan. I want a plan that is an "unplan." I must keep moving and planning, trying, and changing, knitting my days together even as they unravel. So can we do this together?

Remind me to pray: come Lord and quiet the worry. I step, and you steady me. I give, and you keep my hands open. I act, and you fortify me with courage to try and try and try again.

This life is uncertain, Lord, but your love is not.

You tell the story of my life regardless of how little I know about how it ends, except to say, you were there since the beginning, and you appear on every page. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. How could a covenant prayer be helpful to increase trust in God and trustworthy clergy?
2. How would you adapt the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer to reflect the next steps of trust you are ready to take?
3. What question related to *Renewing Covenant Prayer* do you wish you were asked?

[79] https://katebowler.com/blessings/for-living-without-control/. Used with permission.

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